



Park Life No 35. Spring 2026

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Introduction

Welcome to the Spring 2026 and 35th edition of Park Life.

Our “Around the Park” section brings you up to date with what’s going on in our park after the quieter winter months: the new season’s litter management challenges; renewed work associated with the recent major planting in Whippendell Wood; riverbank restoration; and forthcoming events including guided walks and our AGM.

Libby Gower paints a vivid word picture of the exuberance of Spring life, while Peter Fewell describes how technology in the form of trail cams allows us to observe the new animal life that is around us but rarely seen.

Peter Cunliffe takes us back to the time when much of Watford life was centred on the canal – once the equivalent of the railway and M1 rolled into one vital transport artery. The more recent past is explored in Laurie Elvin’s continuing series on our park’s bridges.

Raffi Katz’s and Anna Brooks’ photos illustrate the various facets of this colourful time of year.

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

AROUND THE PARK

Volunteering News:

While Veolia and the Park team do a good job on a day-to-day basis keeping



Cassiobury clear of litter, the large amounts of additional litter left during summer and bank holidays place a significant strain on the team. Our volunteers, who usually operate on the 3rd Saturday of the month, often step in to help – an example is Oliver (see photo), one of our Duke of Edinburgh Award volunteers, who helped clear significant amounts of rubbish on the Easter bank holiday. Our thanks go to all those who, like him, litter-pick the park on a regular basis.

Another aspect of the litter challenge are the large bags of rubbish left by picnickers visiting at peak times. Large “wire mesh” bins allow the gathering of such rubbish, but animals then spread it around, and such bins are hard to empty. The park team is investigating the use of some form of covered wheelie bin as a replacement. The issue is more difficult than might appear, due to larger bins needing trucks that can't come into the park, and others not being able to be emptied by the Veolia team. The search continues and hopefully we'll soon have some options to consider.

Of course, if people took their rubbish home the problem would not arise in the first place!

Over 50 people have now registered for conservation activities, giving us a good pool to call upon to operate the two groups per month we now run. That said, we always need more people, so if you are interested why not give it a go! If weekend opportunities don't suit, then Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) run weekday working parties in the nature reserve and Whippendell Wood.

Apart from joining work parties and litter-picking, volunteers have helped with “follow-up work” associated with last year's planting of 3,000 saplings (Oak, Hornbeam, Cherry, Hawthorn etc) in Whippendell to replace the Ash trees that had fallen victim to Ash Dieback disease. These have had to be checked, and replaced where necessary, although the 80% survival rate of the original planting is quite satisfactory. Stronger tree guards have been fitted to provide better protection against deer. Similar checks will be carried out next year.

As usual bird feeders were placed near the hide throughout the winter months. This season our feathered friends got through 73kg (160lbs) of seeds and 52 kg (114lbs) of nuts; bought by FoCP at a cost of £257.50. Topping them up required volunteers to make approximately 60 visits.



Hanging the Feeders



Bird-watchers of the future

As well as members joining working parties etc FoCP contributed £2,200 toward the cost of two specialist benches near the Cedar café. These are designed to help wheelchair users gain better access to the table-tops and thus allow easier placing of food and drinks.

CCP

Over the last 3 months Community Connection Projects (river conservation and maintenance) have coppiced the Osier Willow by the Rustic bridge, using the



Coppiced Willow

branches for a dead hedge and reinforcement of the riverside path to prevent bank side erosion. Kingfisher perches were installed upstream of the Rustic bridge, and in the Northern Reserve the path was repaired with hydrated lime, and soil gathered through redefining steps by the canal.



Riverbank reinforcement

We packed out the “beach” area near the Rustic bridge with brash bundles made from willow branches, added stakes and wired batons and started to plant up with translocated Sedges and Flag Iris. Also cut back the Horse Chestnut and removed willow from the river.

Along the Gade we continued River-fly monitoring, controlling Signal Crayfish, and regularly clearing debris from the weirs.

In the wider park we removed invasive Snowberry, Laurel and Three-Cornered Leeks, and cleared Bramble from the Peace Garden.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Heritage Walks: 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 with Laurie Elvin, archaeologist and local historian.

The walks last 1.5 - 2 hours, starting from outside the Hub's Cedar Café on the upper paved patio (above the splash pools).

Sunday 4th June - 11 am.

Wednesday 1st July - 6 pm.

Saturday 12th September - 2.30 pm.

Booking is essential on Eventbrite. £3.00 per person (not refundable).

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/cassiobury-park-hub-team-18604052103>

Butterfly Walk: led by Peter Fewell 28th June – 2pm at Langley Way entrance.

AGM: The FoCP AGM will take place on Wednesday 27th May at 7.30pm, at St Lukes Church in Cassiobury. Come along – catch up on our activities and chat over wine and nibbles. Local wood-turner Tim Pettigrew will sell his beautiful bowls, made of material harvested from Cassiobury, with all proceeds donated to the Friends.

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@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk. For HMWT activities see their website.

Alec Thomas. Robert Barnes. Alex Popple

The story of the bridges continues.

Since 2023 the FoCP website has included a feature which shows the locations of each of the park bridges, together with brief descriptions and photos. Here's the link:

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

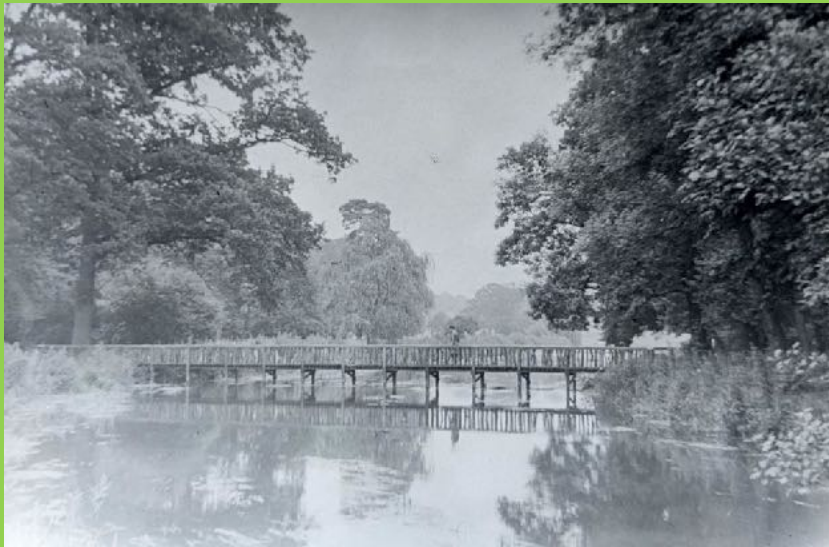
This article is the fifth in a series about individual bridges, giving more information about each - in this case the Meadow Bridge.



This footbridge is similar to two other bridges constructed from concrete and metal, installed in the mid-1950s: Crowfoot Bridge (see Park Life 26) and Kingfisher Bridge. It connects the main eastern part of Cassiobury to the meadow contained within the large meander in the River Gade, which was created in the early part of the 19th century. It was possibly suggested to the Earl of Essex by the Landscape Gardener, Humphry Repton. The land within was named “Pheasant Meadow” on a map published in 1873. It is likely that it was planted and managed for shooting. Before the meander was created, the fields on both sides of the river were ‘meads’ or meadows, with evidence of irrigation for hay crops.



The undated photo (above) shows an earlier wooden bridge being used to support the new bridge during construction. This earlier bridge (see photo below) had wooden piers and footway with barriers of rustic timber. It was probably built by Watford Borough Council after this part of the park was bought in 1923 and first appears on the 1953 OS map.



If you stand in the middle of the Meadow bridge and look southwards, there is a concrete weir about 45 metres downstream (see photo), with two gaps that formerly could be closed by metal sluices. This was part of a water management system, which controlled the levels in the commercial watercress beds (now the Wetlands Nature

area). Evidence of when this was constructed or the sluices removed is unknown. However, various maps show a footbridge and sluice or weir in this location at least since 1887. These were probably wooden structures.



Crossing the Meadow bridge from the main park, there is a path to the right that follows the river. On the left of the path there are two pools that have been enlarged and improved as part of the recent Wetlands development project. The large crescent-shaped pool is an “Off River Support Unit (ORSU) - a calm area separate from the main flow of the river which provides a fish breeding ground protected from predators. The path crosses another small bridge (The Scrape Bridge) over a channel that connects the ORSU pool to the river. This bridge was renewed as part of the Wetland scheme with the old wooden foot-bridge being replaced with a new long-life steel and recycled plastic structure. Photographs of this and the wooden bridge it replaced can be seen on the website link (see above).

Continuing along this route you reach another path, running parallel to the canal. Turning right takes you to the Ironbridge Lock and back towards the Hub. Turn left and the path leads to the birdwatching hide and Little Meadow bridge, which crosses

a surviving channel of the original course of the river, before the artificial meander was formed, and which gives vehicle access to the meadow. Photographs of the present culvert bridge and previous concrete and metal bridge which it recently replaced are shown on the website.

The meadow floods after periods of heavy rain, providing valuable habitat and helps to reduce flooding in more vulnerable places downstream. However when dry it can be explored and the recently created raised Wetland viewing area can be visited. A boardwalk is being planned which will give all-year-round access to this area.

Laurie Elvin, April 2026

(With thanks to the Museum of Watford for the use of photos from their collection)

Grand Junction Canal: from industrial artery to leisure time destination

For anyone strolling along the peaceful canal towpath in Cassiobury Park it's hard to imagine that it was once as much a symbol of innovation as AI is today.

Britain's canals were the driving force behind the industrial revolution and Cassiobury was an important stretch in the network of waterways built to link the coal mines and heavy industries of the Midlands and North with London. Previously, overland transport relied on pack horses which could only carry about an eighth of a ton. Within a few decades thousands of miles of canals enabled horse-drawn boats to carry between 30 and 50 tons of cargo as "Canal Mania" gripped investors in what was the dotcom bubble of its day.

The Grand Junction Canal, as it was then called, was approved by Act of Parliament in 1793 and was fully operational by 1805, stretching from Brentford on the Thames to Braunston near Daventry, forming the southern end of the mainline from Birmingham. Opened in 1797, the section between Watford and Kings Langley was carefully designed to provide the owners of Cassiobury Park (the Earl of Essex) and Grove Park (Lord Clarendon) with an attractive river-like waterway through their land. Its main purpose was as a national thoroughfare, and while historians are keen not to overstate its impact on the local economy, the area around Cassiobury undoubtedly benefited from managing supplies of bulky goods such as coal, iron, timber, bricks and grain, as well as the ability to ship out local products including paper and gravel.

Abundant coal brought obvious benefits: as a domestic fuel to heat homes, and to power the steam engines of local industries. Such was the threat to North-East coal producers, who had enjoyed a near-monopoly on supplying London via the North Sea and the Thames, that the canal at Cassiobury became the frontline of the commercial battle between them and their Midlands rivals.

Geordie producers successfully lobbied for a Coal Tax to be levied on shipments using the Grand Junction, and Lady Capel's Wharf - just north of our park and named after the Earl of Essex's wife - was developed at Bridge 163 so that coal could be unloaded to avoid payment of the duty. Over time the rules were relaxed and they were abolished in 1890 though the wharf continued to serve local trades for some time.

Although most traffic actually passed through, a busy trading post was established next to the Rickmansworth Road where the Cassio Bridge Wharf saw, as Watford expanded, supplies such as timber and bricks unloaded, and the neighbouring

Halfway House pub (demolished in the 1950s) offered refreshment for wharf workers and boatmen.

If there was one local industry that owes its success to the canal it was paper manufacturing, pioneered by John Dickinson who harnessed the availability of cheap coal to power his furnaces at canal-side mills at Apsley, Kings Langley, Croxley Green and Batchworth. He made pulp from cotton rags from London and later Esparto grass from Egypt, and sent his finished paper back south for newspapers and commercial stationery. Business was so brisk that John Dickinson & Co supplemented its use of commercial carriers with its own fleet of liveried boats nicknamed the “Croxy Dashers”.

In 1925, the Ovaltine factory at Kings Langley also began operating its own fleet, which grew to seven pairs of narrowboats at its peak before being scaled back in the 1950s. Road largely remained the most important form of transport for local farmers though some fertilised their fields with manure in the form of “night soil” brought from London by barge. Tooveys flour mill in Kings Langley was another firm to operate its own boats, bringing in grain from Brentford and coal from Warwickshire. Another business that owed its early success to the canal was George Tidcombe & Son of Watford which made machinery for the paper industry at home and abroad.

The opening of the London and Birmingham Railway in 1838 was part of a new transport revolution that set the clock ticking for the end of the golden age for canals. John Dickinson & Co was among those to see the opportunities of steam trains, building its own branch line from Croxley to join the new mainline at Watford. A switch from horses to steam-driven and later to diesel engine boats could not match the speed of first railways, and then lorries using the expanding road network. By 1929, when the Grand Junction merged to create the Grand Union Canal, the decline of canals for commercial traffic was terminal, even if a few working boats, such as the last of the Ovaltine fleet, continued into the 1960s.

Thankfully, there was a growing tide of goodwill to save canals for leisure use. In a foretaste of what was to come in 1940 Berkhamsted Urban Council persuaded the Grand Union Canal Company to open the towpath as a public right of way, leading to agreements with other local authorities on the route, including Watford, and enjoyed by thousands of visitors to Cassiobury today.

Peter Cunliffe, April 2026

Shiny Celandines Herald Spring

Spring 2026 has been so gloriously enjoyable that I failed to keep records of the phenology! Whilst watching golden Daffodils die back and be replaced by paler Narcissi and Jonquils I was suddenly aware of tiny Lesser Celandines with 8 yellow shiny petals, growing close to the edge of the croquet lawn. They have heart-shaped green leaves and like damp places so I was rather surprised to see them there. They belong to the buttercup family (*Ranunculus*) and as the flowers age the petals may turn white. Then sometime around March 20th after a few days of sunshine there was an eponymous Chiff Chaff calling its name from the exact same tree just inside the park entrance at Stratford Way, as last year and the year before. As only a few green buds had opened on the tree it was worth stopping to find this small brown and grey warbler, and to marvel at it having flown all the way back from



Celandines

Spot the Woodpecker!

Africa, to breed here during the summer. Before too many days had passed I was hearing the Blackcap's more joyous babble of warbler song, followed by a pause, then another burst and a pause. All felt well with the world, which it most certainly wasn't, given the global situation, but at least spirits were uplifted. More and more people are learning birdsong, perhaps helped by the Merlin app on their phones. It's been fun watching Sam West teach Abe about bird-watching on Channel 5, especially as he reckoned only to know the Robin. This year the Robin seems to be always there - close by us on a walk and especially in the woods or garden. Their song is about keeping their mate in their own territory, probably on a nest with a clutch of small white, red speckled eggs. No wonder we identify with 'our Robin'.

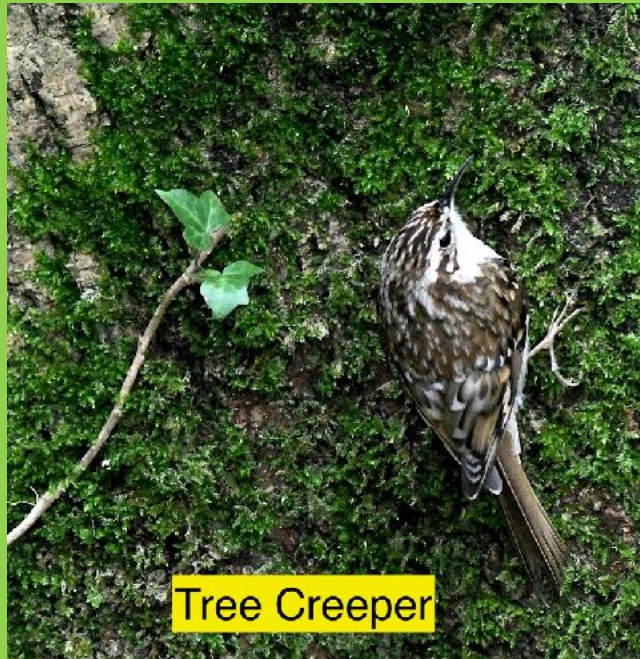
Blossom came and went- wild bird cherry, blackthorn, cherry trees in the park around the bandstand.

Currently the two Crab Apple trees on the hill are totally covered in blossom and hawthorn has cascades of white 'May blossom' with its musty smell, just opening up. So far so normal, or is it? Everything is getting earlier, at least in the bluebell woods. A carpet of bulbs created a wonderful deep purple blue haze in Whippendell Wood. Above in the trees listen out for nuthatches calling, a sudden 'yaffle' from a green woodpecker or spot a brown speckled tree creeper working its way up the ridged trunk of an oak.

In my garden the naturalised blue bells are spreading each year as new bulbs form and wild pale yellow Primroses have easily spread by



Robin



Tree Creeper

seed. This is quintessential spring at its best as more fresh green leaf buds on beech, hornbeam, hazel and birch begin to unfurl their bright leaves

against a blue sky! Of course mornings may be chilly with wind from the East or perhaps a slight overnight frost as heat radiates away, but once the air has warmed and the sun is strong then the butterflies come out. Brimstones first, fluttering about in search of a source of nectar. Next a pair of Orange tips; the males are white with the wing tips orange and edged in black with a small eyespot. The females lack the orange colour and are just tipped in black. Both have an elaborate green speckling on the underside of the wings. The female lays single eggs on wild garlic, plentiful in April, also on Cuckoo flowers and other Crucifers flowering now like purple Honesty. They might get nectar from Lesser Periwinkles which are evergreen wild or garden flowers. Also around are tiny Holly Blues, usually in pairs flying quite rapidly around the evergreens. I see them above Bay and Ivy in my garden. Also in the park Mining bees are emerging from holes in the ground, despite the soil being hard baked already. Buff tailed bees and other bee species have also emerged from underground winter nests. These are queens and soon set to work creating new wax cells in which to lay eggs. Tiny wild Dog Violets are flowering amongst short grass, although scentless they should definitely not be mown away yet. The flowers have five petals, 4 upright and one horizontal keel as in pansies. My garden is alive with insects, hover flies and gnats, six and two spot ladybirds emerging from hibernation in the leaf axils on buddleia. These insects and small spiders help start off food chains for the birds, which are not missing the less natural nuts and seed in feeders. A blue tit flew into my open conservatory door, hovered frantically and then retreated! Another exciting wildlife encounter, the rear view of a badger in early evening before dark as it disappeared into the corner of my multi-species hedge under the oak tree! I was surprised by the length of the tail but had never seen one in the garden despite plenty of evidence they live nearby.



Elizabeth Gower, April 2026.

The Nectar Pot

With warmer days starting in March the first butterflies came out of hibernation. By late March and into April these butterflies were joined by species hatching out of their pupa.



Saturday 25th April made my day - Holly Blue were out along with the Orange-tips and we counted 29 of each species! Also Red Admiral, Brimstone, Peacock, Speckled Wood, Large White, a single Comma and Green-Veined White. The Green-Veined white in the photo was feeding on Coralroot a rare member of the cabbage family doing well in Whippendell Woods.

More information on butterflies can be found in the 2025 butterfly report on the Friends of Cassiobury Park website – thanks to Rick Vickers for the bulk of the

work and some help from Nicola Goode regarding confirmed sightings of the White-Letter Hairstreak butterfly. We've asked park management to protect the Elm (food-plant) where these butterflies have been seen.

Trail-cams

As mentioned in the Autumn 2025 edition of Park Life, myself and Rick have been making increasing use of cameras (trail cams) in Whippendell Wood, providing interesting footage beyond the badgers we were initially interested in, and next to whose (possible) setts we have placed the cameras.

Since the last issue Rick and I have discovered more holes that could be sett entrances in Whippendell Wood and logged the grid references. The most significant find was 10 holes in the woodland near the south end of Rousebarn Lane. We cleared a lot of litter and at time of writing we have found that foxes with cubs occupy this area, but so far no badgers.



Animal Trails

There's a network of animal trails running through Whippendell Wood and our trail-cams show they're used by various animals, eg where we find badgers there's always been rabbits.

Smells

Although foxes, deer and rabbits have reasonable night vision a badger's eyesight is poor. The latter rely on smell and hearing. Scent marking also aids route finding along the trails.

Wildlife recorded on trail-cams

Birds: We do encounter birds from time to time eg Tawny Owl on two occasions, Pheasants, Thrush, Robin, Magpie, Wood Pigeon, Crow, and my favourite the Blackbird which is a delight to hear. Some we've heard rather than seen include Greater Spotted Woodpecker and Nuthatch.

Deer: We have continued to capture both Muntjac and Roe Deer on our trail-cams (See Park Life No 34), Muntjac being the most frequent and included in late March a new-born, probably only a few days old. Roe Deer are less numerous - their breeding season is about to begin and we have occasionally captured stags with fully grown antlers.

Foxes: We've observed several foxes over the past six months. Two males have been easily distinguished by their tails: "Kinky-tail" has



regularly passed our cameras at most locations since we started filming in Autumn 26. He's been seen going into occupied badger holes and was seen limping – possibly injured while trying to snatch a badger cub – he was certainly seen challenging a badger (see

photo). He's now recovered. Another regularly seen male is recognised by mange on his tail and is nicknamed "Basil Bog Brush". He and Kinky Tail are possibly the fathers of at least some of the cubs that have appeared.

Badgers:

We have continued to capture badger footage at our original location off Rousebarn Lane. At one time the cameras picked up four adults together, then cubs on 6th April, and on another occasion

captured a badger chasing a fox. Starting in late February we also spotted badgers gathering new bedding. We've also seen quite lot of scratching and grooming - a common activity that goes on both individually and sometimes in pairs, often before some badger wrestling.



Baby Badgers! The first cub first appeared on 15th April and we've since had a shot of three adults and four cubs with a cub trying to re-align a camera on a couple of occasions! More on Whippendell Woods badgers and other wildlife in the next issue.

Peter Fewell, April 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:

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 35. Spring 2026
