

The Friends of Kings Norton Nature Reserve

Newsletter 29 - Summer 2012

Registered Charity No: 1122293

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The flood

A willow undermined by the flood waters lies across the river Rea. Turbulence in the water indicates the location of the 'sharks tooth' weir about 3ft below the surface of the water. Normally there is a gentle flow between the teeth of the weir.



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Chairman's Notes

By Amanda Cadman, 2 July 2012

I'm writing this in the wake of the ferocious storm that occurred on Thursday 28 June. I was away in North Wales at the time, and it always rains in Blaenau Ffestiniog so no surprises when we got a bit of a deluge. It was clear when we got back on Friday, however, that the river had burst its banks at the bridge below us (foot of Meadow Hill Road), and I'm told that it was so dark at 9.30 in the morning that my neighbour's dog caused the lights to go on in their garden when he went outside! It is clear that the reservoir

served its current purpose as a flood abatement mechanism

most effectively, with the water rising some ten feet across the site before dispersing gently down stream. In fact the flooding was not as great as we saw in September 2008, but the



speed of its occurrence was impressive. We have some photos, but if anyone took any pics around the Reserve on that day I'd love to have a copy for our records. I can report that several trees came down, but that the young Grebes on Merecoft are looking extremely cheery.

As ever, I have to thank all those who turn out for the Tuesday WorkOut almost whatever the weather, including of course the 'Solihull boys'. We have met weekly except for the two occasions when we went on instructive outings, to Pepper Wood and Moseley Bog (see the enclosed article) and one very wet day, and have concentrated our attention on developing the wetlands to the north of the reservoir and on grass-cutting and hedge trimming. 'Balsam bashing' is also on the current menu, though the plants are smaller than normal for this stage of the year, due to the cold weather.

Our monthly series of guided walks around the Reserve continues to be taken up by a dedicated few who certainly enjoy seeing new

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developments on site and seasonal changes in the local flora and fauna. I was lucky to lead, with Jean Perring, a pair of very enthusiastic groups from South Birmingham Ramblers' 'Get Walking for the Olympic Games' weekend on 26 and 27 May; people particularly enjoyed having access to the normally inaccessible north side of the reservoir, and were most impressed with its wilderness atmosphere and my warnings about quick-mud if they stepped off the pathways!

At last one of Brian's splendid new interpretation panels has been erected in British Waterways Meadow, and another awaits installation on Wychall Meadows opposite the footbridge. We are enormously lucky to be able to call on Brian's design skills, and I look forward to seeing more of these panels soon at other strategic points of entry to the Reserve. We also installed three new litter bins, acquired with Community Chest funding, though two of them have already been unearthed by the local youth and need to be fitted much more securely.

I mentioned the planting of our Community Orchard trees in the last Newsletter, and I can report that the last few trees were planted in the later spring with the help of GKN Aerospace (along the cycle path) and Kings Norton Police (on the Peafields extension). Sadly someone has kindly broken the top out of one of the trees along the cycle path, though I suspect that it will survive as a mis-shapen bush, and may still produce fruit.

The police brought a party of young people to help us to clear litter along Popes Lane in early April as part of their Safe Haven safeguarding project. It is almost impossible to clear the area of the grot of ages and be in a position to say 'job done'. But they did a magnificent job of hauling out old carpets, car batteries and unidentifiable chunks of metal, as well as mountains of litter. Now the summer greenery has grown up the remaining litter is less obvious – and just maybe we can really clear the area over the coming winter so that next year we only have to tackle new jetsam.

I understand that all the paperwork is now complete for the formal designation of the Popes Lane to Wychall Road extension as Local Nature Reserve, and only awaits signature by the appropriate

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person on the City Council – the complication being the need to identify who that person should be, now that the Council has a different strategic leadership structure and there is no longer a 'Cabinet Member for Leisure'. However, it really shouldn't be long now till the 'proposed extension' becomes a formal part of the Reserve. I am assured that funding is in place to improve access to the area (while restricting access for trail bikes). The Friends, the Ranger Service and the Wildlife Trust are seeking to work in partnership to develop a reed bed on the low-lying part of the 'extension' to improve water quality and develop the area's wildlife habitat potential. Simon Atkinson of the Wildlife Trust very kindly came to our AGM to outline the possibilities, and we look forward to seeing what this partnership working can achieve for our local area.

Our Annual General Meeting took place on 21 May. We agreed to leave subscriptions unchanged. David Hampson, Brian Hewitt and Anne Price were re-elected to the Friends' Committee for the period 2012-15. Jean Perring very kindly agreed to election to fill a vacancy for the balance of the period 2010-13, and Andrew Nabbs generously offered to become involved in our Education programme (as did Peter Marsh from 2013). I am most grateful to Andrew and Peter for their offers of help, and also to Val Saunders and Jennifer Crowe who subsequently expressed a willingness to help with Volunteer Co-ordination. The willingness of members to play an active part in the work of the Reserve is hugely to be welcomed, and I thank you all.

Membership Report

Friends will be very sorry to hear that Alistair Howard's mother died recently after a gruelling few months of illness. Alistair has been magnificent in keeping on top of his work as Treasurer and Membership Secretary for the Friends as well as dealing with his full-time day job and distressing family circumstances, and I can only thank him for keeping us in his sights at this difficult time, and send every good wish to his family as they come to terms with their loss.

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Alistair reported at the AGM that, thanks to the door-knocking help of David Hampson, Anne Price and Ann Bagnall, overdue subscriptions have been brought down to a very low level. The total number of members has risen very slightly, to 225 households. 68% of members have kindly signed up to add Gift Aid to their subscriptions, allowing us to benefit by some £300 per annum from Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs, while 37% now pay by Standing Order. If you haven't signed up to either of these options yet, we would encourage you to do so – it's so much easier for you, and can make a good deal of difference to the Friends' ability to support projects on the Reserve. A concerted effort will be made in the coming months to recruit more members.

Please note that the annual subscription for 2012-13 became due on 1 June 2012.

Across the Bridge

Have you walked across the footbridge over the railway on Station Road recently? The graffiti-on-green has been replaced by some splendid murals produced by pupils from Kings Norton Girls' and Boys' Schools in response to a competition launched by Centro. Their brief suggested that the entries needed to 'incorporate a sense of the Kings Norton and Cotteridge community and transport heritage ... and also convey green/environmental messages'. The winner from the Boys' School is Oliver Blackburn from Wychall Lane (his family are members of the Friends) and his lively and eye-catching design, now professionally sized-up, includes a copy of the LNR Friends' logo. What a marvellous advertisement for the Reserve! Thank you and many congratulations Oliver! Here are a couple of sections of his original design.



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On the Hallucinogenic Effects of Himalayan Balsam

Scientific Name: *Impatiens glandulifera*

Other names: Policeman's helmet, Indian Touch-Me-Not, Ornamental Jewelweed, Pink Peril, Poor Man's Orchid

It is the time of year when many hours of volunteer labour on the Nature Reserve are expended on weeding! A particular scourge is the deceptively pretty Himalayan Balsam.

A large succulent annual introduced in 1839 to Kew Gardens as a greenhouse plant, it escaped to the wild, and is now naturalised in the British Isles and many other countries. It is very invasive and we try to remove as much as possible.

Of the same family as the bedding Impatiens or Busy-lizzies, it grows much taller - up to 2 metres high. It prefers moist areas, usually along riverbanks, but colonises many other areas. Dense stands can suffocate other plants, so when it dies back in winter, riverbanks are left bare and more liable to erosion.

The flowers vary from pale pink to purple and appear from June to October. The shape resembles an old-style English policeman's helmet, hence one of its common names. The flowers produce much nectar and are said to lure pollinating insects away from our other native plants. The hollow stems can be up to 5cm in diameter, and draw up large quantities of water through the roots. If flattened the plant merely sends out new reddish roots at the nodes, and produces vigorous sideshoots, so must be pulled up properly, crushed and composted to ensure it is no longer viable. It makes quite a satisfying musical crunching sound as the stems are trampled underfoot.



To the Nature Reserve volunteer the plant gradually exerts a terrible fascination as one becomes hypnotised by the forests of bright green spikes poking their way inexorably through the undergrowth - usually amongst the prickly brambles or horsetail in

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the damp parts of the reserve, clinging to riverbanks in inaccessible spots, and fighting nettles or goosegrass for supremacy. 'Seek and destroy' is our mission - and we become obsessed with removing every innocuous-looking stem of the stuff within the chosen patch of ground, to prevent an even worse invasion in subsequent years. A relationship to the 'Triffid' plant as described by John Wyndham has not been proven though dangerous mutations are possible. Indeed, Himalayan Balsam seems to move around at night and propagate where none existed before.

The problem is that a single plant can set about 800 seeds, a few weeks after flowering. The seed capsules react to any disturbance, causing the five segments to split and twist explosively, projecting the contents up to 7 metres away. The black, spherical seeds remain viable for about 2 years. They float and can travel along waterways to infest new areas, even germinating under water. So snapping off and destroying the seed heads is essential before they mature.

When the flower spikes develop, a cloying and soporific scent fills the air, and spells of dizziness have been noted amongst some volunteers - though this may also be partly due to sudden bending and straightening movements resulting from uprooting these invading plants in a frenzy. An obsessive and compulsive behaviour has been known, which causes some volunteers to persist in trampling demolished plants long after the rest of the group have given up. A kind of St. Vitus' Dance is performed in which the afflicted volunteer gyrates, jumps and stamps wildly on the heap, in an effort to ensure no stem survives to send out further shoots.

The plant has regrettably few natural enemies, nor does it have much beneficial use - though it is said to soothe the rash caused by Poison ivy, and can apparently be eaten like a vegetable when boiled. A recipe for a curry made from the seeds has also been found online. A yellow dye can also be produced from the plant.

There is so much Himalayan Balsam in the Reserve (and the rest of the countryside) that if it was found possible to dry the leaves and smoke them as a legal alternative to Hashish, it might rapidly

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be harvested to extinction, thus ruining the Marihuana market, and we could concentrate on other conservation tasks. The writer has not personally tried the effect of smoking this substance as he gave up his pipe about twenty years ago - so cannot vouch for its addictive qualities.

Perhaps the yokels who continue to vandalise our Reserve on occasions would be rendered less destructive as a result of smoking the stuff, and not set fire to any more of our log-piles and benches.

The main aim in controlling this weed is to prevent it setting seed, smothering native vegetation, reducing biodiversity and degrading our watercourses. It is easily uprooted (unlike Japanese Knotweed!) and although eradication is virtually impossible, it can be significantly reduced year on year. An army of additional volunteers would be welcome to assist in our Balsam-bashing - see the Events calendar or contact Amanda on 0121 624 3865....

School Report

The Jubilee Project

On 22 May 2012 a small group of children, parents and staff from Kings Norton Nursery joined Brian Hewitt and Graham Layton in Wychall Meadows, just across from the Nursery, to take part in the Friends' Jubilee Project.

Arising from a suggestion by one of our members, in April the Friends Committee had agreed to a Jubilee planting project in recognition of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. In 2010/2011 Kings Norton Nursery children had planted 24 acorns. By spring of this year they had grown into well-established saplings and the



Nursery offered them to the Friends for planting on the Reserve. The Committee decided that the planting of these 24 oaks, together with other fruiting whips available from the Community

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Orchards Project, would be a suitable, environmentally beneficial memorial of the Diamond Jubilee.

The small planting event in May was in time for the June deadline for Jubilee activities. The children themselves planted four oaks, and a further four were planted later on the same day, all in the vicinity of Wychall Meadows. Several of the fruiting whips have also been planted in that area. The remaining 16 oaks have been potted up for planting in the autumn.

Schools Liaison

Following an appeal at the Annual General Meeting this year, Andrew Nabbs has agreed to take on the work of liaising with schools and similar institutions to encourage the use of the Nature Reserve in their educational activities. His offer to become involved in this important aspect of the Friends' work is very much appreciated.

It is felt that the Reserve is a natural resource which, with planning, could be integrated into several aspects of a school's curriculum, from nursery age up to senior school. Although it must be seen to be part of a long process, if children are introduced to the detail of the natural world on their doorstep, so to speak, it may spark off an interest in a few whilst they are still young, or at least may lead in later life to a greater appreciation and understanding of the need to look after the natural environment.

Initially working together with Graham Layton, who has been covering school liaison to date, Andrew will be consolidating the Friends' present relationship with schools that already use the Reserve and will then seek to establish links with the remaining schools within the vicinity.

Graham Layton

Dawn Chorus Walk

Twelve people turned out for the 05.30 start to the 2012 Dawn Chorus Walk, which took place on International Dawn Chorus Day, Sunday 6 May. (Did you know, by the way, that IDCD began here in Birmingham? An early morning walk was led by the Urban

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Wildlife Trust – as it was then called – at Moseley Bog in 1984, and the idea has now caught on around the world. The international event is still co-ordinated by the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country.)

It's always colder than you expect at that time of the morning, and sadly it was impossible to arrange a post-walk breakfast this year to get us warm again, but it was a great occasion, and the Reserve turned up trumps. Thirty-two bird species in total were either seen or heard during the walk, which took us alongside the Reservoir and to the Peafields, then back through the riverside woods and to Merecroft. Thanks are due to Peter Bromley and Phil Evans, whose ornithological expertise makes these walks such a special experience for Friends. Here is a list of the birds we saw/heard, in order of appearance: Mallard, Wren, Wood Pigeon, Magpie, Jackdaw, Crow, Song Thrush, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Coot, Lesser Black Backed Gull, Canada Goose, Robin, Blackbird, Great Tit, Blackcap, Moorhen, Stock Dove, Blue Tit, Collared Dove, Chiffchaff, Green Woodpecker, Dunnock, Greenfinch, Willow Warbler, Starling, Long Tailed Tit, Jackdaw, Reed Bunting, Nuthatch, Kestrel, Chaffinch, Great Crested Grebe.

FKNNR Monthly Guided Walks

These guided walks take place on the last Saturday of each month, starting at 10.30 am and ending around 12 noon. We meet by the British Waterways meadow entrance, at the corner of Wychall Lane and Meadow Hill Road. Waterproof footwear and tough outdoor clothes are essential, and binoculars, if you have them, are recommended. The walks tend to alternate between the south side of the Reserve and the Wychall/River Rea corridor.

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Pepper Wood and Moseley Bog visits

Pepper Wood

On 29 May the Tuesday WorkOut team had a day off, and we visited a Woodland Trust Reserve at Pepper Wood, Fairfield near Bromsgrove.

As we were not due to begin our guided walk till 1.30pm a few of us enjoyed a pub lunch at 'the Nailers Arms'. Then we met our guide, Hugh Jenkins of the Friends of Pepper Wood (who some may have seen demonstrating the pole-lathe at local events). He had kindly



agreed to show our group around this beautiful ancient woodland, now managed by the Woodland Trust, and tell us something about the woodland management undertaken there.

Pepper Wood extends to over fifty hectares, a remnant of the historic Forest of Feckenham, dating back to the 13th century. Dominated by oak and birch, the wood has an exceptional diversity of tree and shrub species - small- and large-leaved Lime and Wild Service (or Chequers tree) are all to be found here. The latter has small fruit, which were once made into an alcoholic drink.

Selected areas of the woodland are managed by coppicing, providing modestly-priced posts, stakes and poles for local fencing and horticultural needs. A rotation is practised, and the new branches springing from the base of coppiced trees are 'harvested' at suitable intervals, usually about six to eight years.



Another by-product of Pepper Wood's management is charcoal, produced by heating suitable wood in a great metal

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outdoor oven, excluding air, which would otherwise let the wood burn away to ash.

Some areas are cleared to allow new trees to develop, to ensure a range of different ages and maturity in the woodland. We saw fenced enclosures in some places, which are necessary to prevent access by muntjac and other deer, which otherwise destroy new growth.

We were shown a large expanse of Lily-of-the-valley growing wild under the trees, and an unremarkable four-leaved plant called Herb Paris, but which is quite rare. Also present is thick-spiked Wood Sedge, and Violet Helleborine; and the woodland is home to the White Admiral butterfly and a variety of moths. We also came close to a small pond said to contain Crested Newts, though they were well-concealed beneath the mass of grasses in the water, which is their favoured habitat.



Pepper Wood is open to everyone, and with our informative guide we gained valuable insight into the management of woodland, of which we have our fair share in Kings Norton Nature Reserve.

Moseley Bog

FKNNR volunteers made another 'educational' visit on 12 June, this time to Moseley Bog.

The land comprising Moseley Bog and Joy's Wood is located near Sarehole Mill. It was declared a Local Nature Reserve in 1991, is a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation; and it is home to a rich diversity of habitats, including the bog itself, various dry woodlands and a high number of species including birds, invertebrates and small mammals. In addition, the site also has important archaeological significance including two Bronze Age 'burnt mounds' with Scheduled



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Ancient Monument status, and a former millpool and dam.

The area is made up of both wet and dry woodland together with patches of fen vegetation that have developed on the site. Joy's Wood, named after one of the original campaigners for the site's preservation, is a mosaic of grassland, hedgerows, woodland and mixed broadleaved plantations.



The writer of 'Lord of the Rings', J.R.R. Tolkien, lived in Wake Green Road, and Moseley Bog is reputed to have been an inspiration for his writing. One of the ancient trees looked like the 'Ent' that rescued the Hobbits, and one could imagine a face in the bark.

The Solihull volunteers joined us, along with Moseley Bog's own working group. We were shown round by Francesca, the Wildlife Trust's Moseley Bog Project Officer, and we were impressed by the long sections of pathways and boardwalk which facilitate enjoyment by wheelchair

users, all constructed very professionally thanks to Lottery funding of over a third of a million pounds in 2010. Other raised lengths of walkway dating from an earlier volunteer initiative employed railway sleepers with netting overlaid for grip, affording good access to the woodland and wetland areas without damaging the flora and fauna.

Our attention was drawn to several interesting plants including wood horsetail, bluebells and a rare epiphytic fern growing on a tree trunk. Some large trees including a huge silver birch and oak were commented on, though one beech about 350 years old had had to be felled recently due to safety issues.

We were shown the site of one of the 'burnt mounds' – similar sites give evidence of early tribes heating up rocks, perhaps for bathing in a dammed stream (the Coldbath Brook!) with animal hides stretched over poles to keep the steam in! The rocks are found as broken fragments signifying sudden cooling in water, with charcoal as evidence of fire.

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After our walk and a break for lunch, we all joined forces for nearly two hours working to clear a roadside hedge-line of overgrowth and weeds to reveal recently-planted hawthorn, and enable it to flourish once more.

Our visit gave us more ideas for the management of Kings Norton Nature Reserve, and thanks are due to the Wildlife Trust and volunteers for making us so welcome.

Brian Hewitt

On the neighbouring front

I'm sure you will agree that Kings Norton Park is looking terrific. Its Friends group has planted up shrub beds, and the play area and the Civic Garden are being well refurbished. A number of native trees have been planted alongside the Rea and a wildflower meadow is being developed there, with an annual 'cut and carry' mowing regime instituted so that that area will continue our own aims to improve biodiversity and habitat for wildlife along the river. A new 'Friends of' group has been set up recently at West Heath Park, and I wish them every success in improving that green space for people and (perhaps to a lesser extent) for wildlife. Wildlife is to the fore in the development of Plot 1 at Hurst Mill Allotments, a plot which is quite unsuitable for vegetable cultivation, being largely shaded for most of the day, but which will, it is hoped, provide a pond and shelter for a wide variety of birds, insects and amphibians. Not far from the Rea, it should again form part of the wildlife corridor we seek to encourage.

This is your magazine. Please let Amanda know if you have an article for publication or photos of wildlife on the LNR. We will be glad to try and answer your questions about the LNR, its history and management, its wildlife or any other issue that may be of interest to the Friends. Please note that the copy deadline for the next issue will be by Thursday 25 October 2012.

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Tail Piece

Dactylorhiza fuchsii
Common Spotted Orchid

Probably one of the orchids
planted in memory of
Bert Cage

Photo by Jil Bromley



Contacts

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(* Denotes Trustee of the Charity)

Committee Members: Peter Cage, David Hampson, Brian Hewitt, Lynn Horsnett, Nicola Human, Andrew Nabbs, Mike Lawrence, Elizabeth Parker, Jean Perring, Anne Price, Val Saunders.

Newsletter: Peter and Sarah Cage (0121 433 3486) and Amanda Cadman

Environment Agency Hotline	0800 807060
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Northfield Rangers	0121 445 6036
West Midlands Police	0345 113 5000 ext. 7826 6363
Anti-social behaviour Hotline	0121 303 1111

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