NEWSLETTER No. 20

Friends of Meadow Park

SPRING & SUMMER 2011

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF GRANT LAND

The Nottinghamshire County Council grant we reported on winning a year ago has made a highly visible difference to the park, which has drawn many favourable comments.

A few of the new trees

East Leake Arboretum will take a couple of generations to reach maturity, and will never be huge, but is of enduring value in illustrating to anyone visiting the park just what a variety of trees we can call British. After the long, dry summer, it looks as if we may have lost a couple of specimens, and it is only thanks to the dedicated work of volunteers who have hauled gallons of water every week that the rest are beginning to thrive. Once the correct, permanent, labels arrive, with botanical names as well as the common ones, this long-dreamt of project can be said to be finally launched.

Of instant benefit has been the diagonal path laid across the park from the Bateman Road entrance to the Lantern Lane corner. It has created a well-used and dry route between two areas of the village, and is especially helpful to students at Harry Carlton School who can now arrive at their lessons with clean shoes.

The sturdy new notice board sited near the sculpture is already proving popular with passers-by, and should survive better than the two which Kevin Shaw made for us in the past (such a shame that a heavy steel frame bolted into concrete should be necessary to carry a few simple bits of information and publicity; luckily it also seems to be impervious to having eggs thrown at it!)

Finally, a couple of similarly strong metal benches may well have been installed by the time this newsletter reaches members. They will supplement the present motley assortment, some of which are sadly vulnerable to the loutish element among park users; metal ones, such as those donated by the Guides and Cllr Mrs Males, remain intact.

All that was a wonderful UP. The DOWN has been our failure to get funding for the "Trim Track" exercise trail mentioned in a previous newsletter. In spite of making a well-researched and carefully costed application, with the enthusiastic support of Groundworks Nottingham, we were turned down by the "Big Lottery". But then we got the offer of £50,000 from a big industrial consortium who fund environmental/conservation projects all over the world provided we could put up some of the monies ourselves. The Parish Council was the original proposer of the scheme and supports it in principle, but could not help at this time, so we and Groundworks Nottingham are looking hard for another donor(s), sadly without success so far. Perhaps one day....?

FRIENDS OF MEADOW PARK CALENDAR FOR

2012

PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY MEMBERS, 12 DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE PARK IN MANY MOODS.

£6.00 EACH

AVAILABLE AT THE PARISH OFFICE

HAVE YOU SEEN A WATER VOLE IN THE PARK?

Unfortunately, the answer is almost certainly "No". We were approached recently by Nottinghamshire Biodiversity Action Group, who are conducting a county-wide wildlife survey, looking at water voles in particular. At the last survey in 2000, water voles were plentiful in the Rushcliffe area, but national numbers have declined in the last decade; we can scarcely hope to have escaped the trend.

One Friend thinks he saw a dead specimen near the brook in early August, but no-one on the committee could recall ever seeing one (and if reports of mink in the neighbourhood are correct, we shan't in future either). If you know better, PLEASE let us know.

Over the years, FMP have accumulated a lot of information about the park's flora and fauna, and need someone to act as Recorder, to collate it all and circulate it to bodies like the Biodiversity Group, Wildlife Trusts and so on.

COULD YOU BE THAT PERSON?

Please get in touch if you are interested (and have access to the Internet).

A MANAGEMENT DILEMMA

Kevin Gibbons has reported seeing all these butterflies in the park this summer:-

Small White
Green-veined White
Brimstone
Small Skipper
Meadow Brown
Ringlet
Hedge Brown
Peacock
Small Tortoiseshell
Red Admiral
Speckled Wood
Comma,

plus some day flying moths, including Cinnabar and five/six spot Burnet.

Max Watson photographed this Small Tortoiseshell feasting on our never-ending supply of ragwort

A self-confessed enthusiast, Kevin described the meadow mowing pattern best suited to butterflies (early Spring and late Autumn, never closer than 5cm, i.e. above low growing food plants like birdsfoot trefoil, and with areas of tall grass and plants, for food and shelter, left uncut in rotation), which differs somewhat from the present regime. Unsurprisingly, this sparked a debate among the most knowledgeable Friends, who quoted authorities like Natural England and local Wildlife Trusts.

Following the guidance of the agreed Park Management Plan, the meadows are currently mowed twice per year, once in late July or August and again in late September or October, depending on the weather. A July cut gives time for ground-nesting birds to have fledged their young, and for most wildflowers to have set and shed their seed. This replicates traditional methods: July mowing produces good hay to be stored, after which the fields are grazed until the Autumn - obviously, our open meadows cannot be grazed, hence we have the second cut instead. To increase crop yields, these fields used to be heavily fertilised, but the wildflowers we want to encourage need poorer soil. Therefore, after mowing, the arisings, which would return their nutrient content to the ground if left lying, are taken away. It is also policy to leave a 5metre strip along some field margins unmown, to give the taller and maybe late-seeding flowers a chance.

One of the objectives of all parties involved in Meadow Park is to increase the diversity of wildlife we have, and obviously different species have different habitat requirements. A balance has to be struck between what the trees, flowers, birds and butterflies, all prefer. Now that the butterflies have a champion, no doubt more thought will be given to their needs.

From a practical point of view, one must (a) remember that the contractor who does the mowing might not welcome very complex specifications and (b) accept that an occasional over-close cut or even none at all will not cause permanent damage to any wildlife habitat. Nature is very resilient!

GUIDED WALKS

After an interval of several years, we organised a series of three "Get to Know Your Park" walks during the summer, and are very grateful to Max Watson, Dennis Fox and Ann Weekley for leading them.

The first, early in May, was to look at and listen to birds, and about twenty people took part. 23 species of bird were seen and/or heard, including the kingfisher, which has become the park's mascot. Hall Field demonstrated the value of its having been left fallow for a few years, with the best concentration of shyer birds like this whitethroat.

We made the mistake of holding the tree walk on a Bank Holiday, which, together with some poor weather earlier in the week, made for a small attendance. The arboretum was much admired, of course, and also the improvements made since the last walk in 2005, such as the well-layed hedges in Bateman Field. Sadly, the frost damage caused by the harsh winter was in evidence, especially to some of our ash trees; oaks seem to be made of sterner stuff, as they are showing less damage.

The wildflower walk was scheduled for mid-July, but because of the very dry spring and early summer many flowers bloomed earlier than usual, so we brought the walk forward a couple of weeks. More than twenty people of all ages enjoyed a leisurely wander through the park looking at the variety of habitats and identifying more than 40 different species of flower (from the almost 60 that Ann Weekley had seen earlier in the week) including the meadow cranesbill pictured.

As a result of the walks, we gained one or two new members, and the general response was positive, so we shall look at the possibility of some more walks next year. Meanwhile, why not pick up a free leaflet from the Parish Office, which describes a couple of routes round the park, and see what you can see for yourself?

How to contact the FRIENDS OF MEADOW PARK (and to join - please spread the word!)
c/o The Parish Office, 45 Main Street, East Leake, LE12 6PF, tel: 852217 (weekday mornings)
or email our Secretary: meadowpark@eastleake.net

"ACTIVITY DAYS"

FEBRUARY

With 12 volunteers, we were able to tackle several jobs.

We cleared a further 5 metres of shrubs along the brook in the NE corner of Gibsons Field and stacked the arisings beside the brook to form "bug-houses".

We coppiced some of the willow in the withy bed in Bateman Field and used the coppicings to extend the bed.

Meanwhile two volunteers spent time clearing rubbish from the brooks.

"Have cart, will go ……gardening!"

MARCH

15 volunteers were present for at least part of the time.

The main task was to strip the turf away from some approximately 1m square patches among the trees in the arboretum. We intended to sow the patches with wildflower seed straightaway, but had to postpone this because recent very cold weather had left the ground too cold and wet (and very hard to work!). We managed to clear over 20 squares.

The other main work was digging out young dock plants in Oak Meadow, using our new ragwort forks, which proved only fairly effective (they are called "ragforks" for a reason!). 2 people spent all morning at this.

Additionally, the shrubbery was given its pre-season trim, and as ever, some folk did a stint of litter picking.

APRIL

15 members attended and worked in several groups scattered throughout the park.

This was our designated "Spring Clean Day", and the largest party collected the equivalent of 10 black sacks of rubbish, which were piled up for removal by Rushcliffe's StreetWise team.

We also planted 50 bluebells "in the green", together with some rescued plants that had been dug up in error last year, and 5 or 6 red campion plants which had been grown from seed.

Two cleared obstructive vegetation from around the hawthorn saplings planted last March along the new fence near the Bateman Road entrance.

Two (initially – later on 5) scarified and then sowed wild flower seed in the patches cut from the arboretum area last month. Surplus seed was kept for later sowing, and two members took seed away to grow at home in trays ready for planting in the autumn (or even next spring?)

MAY

An attendance of 8-10 managed to:

1. "Walk" the park and cut back vegetation intruding on to pathways.
2. Deconstruct a BMX ramp and reinstate a path in Lagoon Field ready for flail-cutting later in the year.
3. Pick a lot of litter (as usual), including retrieving a damaged seat from Kingston Brook

JUNE

With the holiday season now upon us, fewer people were able to attend, only 7.

We brought forward our annual ragwort and dock pull (or dig or slash) by one month, to catch them before they shed much seed.

A couple of volunteers scythed the extensive patch of hemlock on the southern edge of the Play Field. As this is poisonous we are anxious to keep it down, but find there is a difference of opinion about how best to achieve this; it hinges on whether the plant is biennial or perennial, and it seems the plant itself is unsure about this! Just leaving the debris to rot down on site seemed the best solution, as trying to carry it away would have spread seed.

JULY

Half a dozen volunteers turned up.

One team of 3 cleared ragwort from Oak Meadow and Little Meadow, and made a start in Stonebridge Field, where it was thickest.

The other team slashed the hemlock on the northern side of Oak Meadow, then dug or cut areas of hogweed and dock, and a bit of ragwort, in Bateman Field, where the spread of these "toughies" is not yet severe, but would soon become so if not tackled.

As a result of these two months' efforts (the previous several years', too) the hay quality has improved, with more fine grasses, and the more delicate wildflowers we want to encourage have a better chance, especially the squares we sowed in the arboretum.

EXTRA WORK SESSIONS

* More than 80 volunteer hours have been devoted to watering the new trees, which suffered badly from the dry conditions shortly after planting.
* Four people spent several hours pulling a heavy growth of ragwort in Stonebridge Field. Any plants with cinnabar caterpillars on them were left standing; this is ideal biological control.
* We were fortunate enough to acquire five large sacks of newly cut "green hay" from Herbert's Meadow at Ulverscroft (this belongs to Leicestershire Wildlife Trust and is one of the best wildflower meadows in the county). Within 48 hours of collecting it, a team of five had scythed and scraped about 150m square in Stonebridge Field, spread the seed-rich hay over it, trampled it to loosen the seeds and taped off the whole lot.
* The shrubbery receives quite a lot of unrecorded attention, to keep the main entrance to the park looking tidy.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT HEDGES

From Trevor Jones:

HEDGING - OUR OPTIONS

Hedge in Bateman Field - laid winter 2010

Hedges, our major natural resource of vegetation and wildlife, are man-made. The traditional method of management on farms was to hand trim ("cut") ("brush") them every autumn/winter. "Knuckling", akin to elevated coppicing, can develop naturally at the top of hedges, establishing a semi-permanent level against which the hedge can be trimmed back annually, although small incremental growth must occur. Occasionally, hedge plants do not remain bushy at the bottom. This can be due to the lower trunks being in the shade of the canopies or other herbage. Sheep were able to squeeze through gaps between trunks and such hedges had then to be laid. Once laid, they were then trimmed annually like other hedges.

There is a notion that (hawthorn) hedges can be laid periodically, without trimming in the intervening years. This has never been farming practice. Laying a second time can be difficult/impossible if the first laid pleachers are still in place. Tim Kirk confirms that the procedure described in the previous paragraph was followed at Manor Farm (of which Meadow Park was part). He does not remember a hedge ever having to be laid until he ceased farming there in 1996. In my experience, something has gone seriously wrong on a farm if most of the hedges need laying. Mechanical hedge cutters, particularly flails, have caused serious depletion of hedgerow bird populations, especially where annual trimming is practised.

Conservationists recommend that hedges be trimmed on a three year rota or on alternate sides annually. This allows them to blossom and fruit, providing food for insects and birds. Bushy hedges arguably provide a better environment for small birds than hedges allowed to grow into trees. Some of Meadow Park hedges will soon be too high for conventional laying using hand tools. The options appear to be (1) to increase the frequency of hedge laying sessions, (2) to speed up laying by using chain saws, (3) one-off radical mechanical trimming using shaping saws, (4) coppicing or (5) allowing growth into lines of trees. There will be differing reasoning as to the best course of action.

Acknowledgment: Tim Kirk for facts.

Editor's P.S. All activities that the Friends of Meadow Park undertake are in accordance with the Management Plan, and that includes hedge-laying.

No hedge maintenance at all was carried out between the sale of the land in the early 1990s and when FMP came into being in 2001, by which time all the hedges were overgrown and straggly. In 2000, Notts Wildlife Trust recommended that they should all be laid within 12 years (and then in rotation), a counsel of perfection well beyond FMP's capability. However, our purpose is only to thicken up the lower portions of hedgerow to provide good habitat for wildlife, especially birds (leaving some tall trees for perching), so we do not need to work to the stock-proof standard a farmer would require.

Fortunately, a couple of members had the expertise to teach some more of us, and in the past four winters we have completed the two hedges between Bateman and Gibson's Fields and the western border of the Play Field. Not all the park's hedges would be amenable to laying, being more copse-like in some cases, but over the next few years we expect to lay a similar length of suitable hedge, starting this winter.

AUTUMN ACTIVITY DAYS

Saturday 10 September:
Opening a route into Hall Field, ready for flailing.

Saturday 8 October:
Clearing an area of dense vegetation on the south side of Oak Meadow.

Saturday 12 November & Saturday 10 December:
Hedge-laying - preparation & laying

PLUS Litter-picking every time!

PLEASE COME IF YOU CAN

Meet at the depot behind the Parish Office at 9.50am, to collect tools and discuss the morning's work

And finally, more good news about wildflowers.

SEVEN new species have been seen this year:

Yellow meadow vetchling	Feverfew
Black horehound	Hop
Herb Robert	Orange hawkbit
and Hay (or yellow) rattle	

Yellow rattle is particularly welcome, as it is semi parasitic and inhibits grass growth; arable farmers do not like it, of course, but WE DO!

Great burnet, already fairly plentiful in Bateman Field, does not like rich soil; it has increased a lot this season, indicating that our efforts to reduce fertility levels are beginning to work