

Urban Countryman

Monthly Field Notes

October 2022

October is a month marked by autumnal colours, misty days, heavy dew and fields being ploughed for next year's crops. It was once a month for fairs, offering a last chance for buying and selling livestock and produce before the coming of winter – the famous Nottingham Goose fair takes place in October (Sep 30 to Oct 9), as it has done for more than 7 centuries. It is still a time of relative plenty, ending with Halloween, Samhain and Jack O'Lantern festivals that maintain their links with the harvest.

The orchard fruit season is at its height, with apples, plums and pears aplenty – although you might not know it from the distances that most fruit on display in our supermarkets has travelled. Meanwhile, our hedgerows are adorned with the berries that will see much of our wildlife through the darkest months, the ground beneath our trees is littered with fallen seeds and nuts, and the amazing variety of fungi are at their most abundant.

October is also the time of the annual deer rut, as Britain's largest land mammals enter the mating season. It is also a time of the first major storms. Those around in 1987, especially in the south-east will never forget The Great Storm of 15/16 October, when nature unleashed its fury, with wind speeds in excess of 100mph downing an estimated 15 million trees and causing damage of approx £2,000 million, with 3 million households without power for 3 days. Sadly, it also took the lives of 19 people.

The names of the full moons of September and October are based upon the Autumn Equinox, with the moon occurring closest to the equinox being called the Harvest Moon (this year Sep 10). This year's October full moon occurs on 9th and is called the Hunter's Moon – it is the time of year when sunset and moonrise are closer together than normal and is therefore the perfect time for hunting.

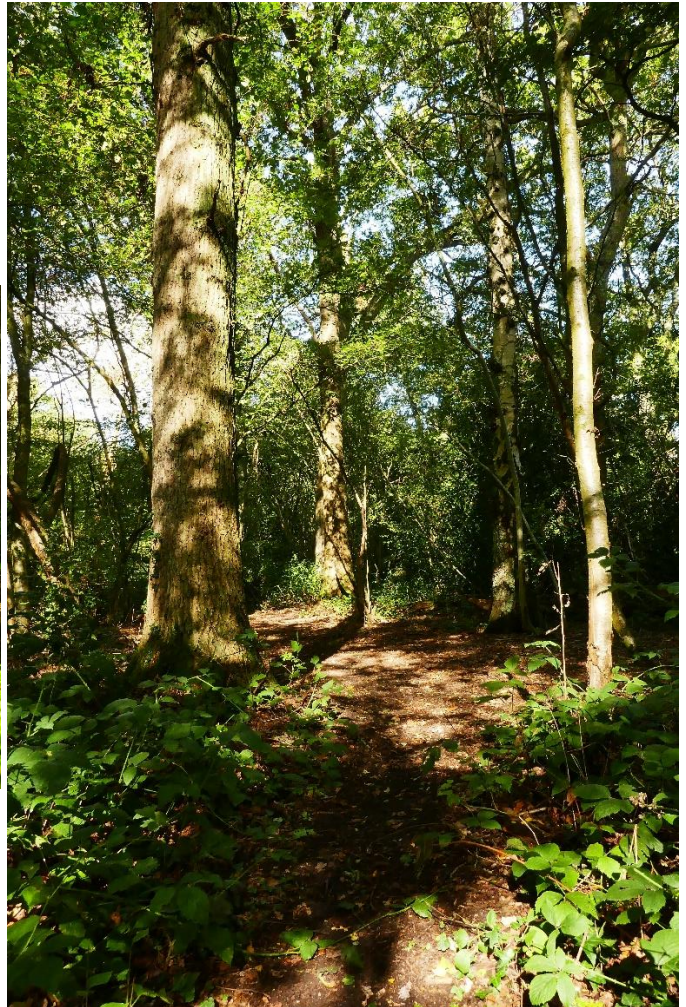
It is the perfect month to don the boots, fleece and hat and head out into the countryside, where autumn is in full swing. The air is fresh and invigorating; the ground is springy underfoot; the light has a mellow softness that is perfect for photography; the shadows are lengthening as the sun hangs lower in the sky, creating great contrasts; the wood smells of earthy dampness and is awash with golden colours and the fantastic world of fungi, and where the morning mists create a wonderful ethereal world. It is a month of darker evenings, perfect for visiting friends or quiet evenings in front of roaring log fires.

Unfortunately, October also contains my least favourite day of the year – when the clocks go back an hour, heralding the sudden advancement of darker evenings.

October 1

Enjoying the first day of October by walking through Piles Wood and Devilsden Wood, both on the edge of Coulsdon's Happy Valley.

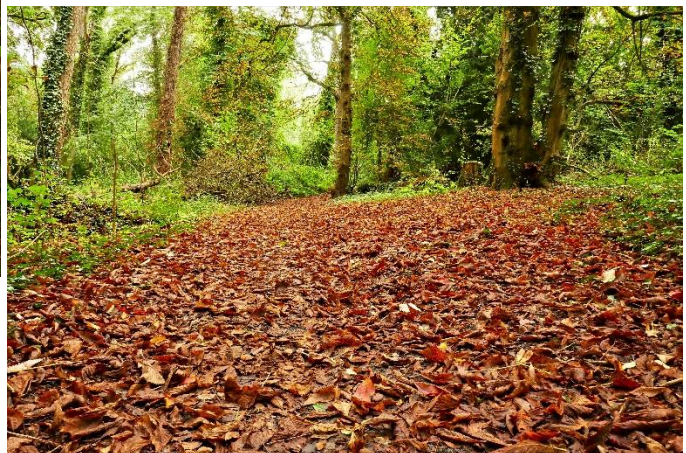
The sunlight floods into glades and along the wider rides, lighting up the woodland floor and the lush green mosses that form soft, springy blankets over fallen trees and limbs. Swirling shadows of branches and leaves are thrown along the bark of soaring trunks, which cast ever-longer shadows across the woodland floor.



Ahead of the strong autumn winds that will see the canopy stripped of its leaves there is still a gloominess where the understory arches to create tunnels through which the woodland paths pass.



Meanwhile, the horse chestnuts have already shed their leaves, which have formed a crisp carpet of brown across the path.



At the same time, the woods are alive with numerous fungi species, an amazing assortment of shapes, colours, sizes and textures (below).



Sulphur Tuft



Beefsteak fungus



Porcelain fungus



Glistening Inkcaps



Black Bulgar



Blushing Bracket



Small Stagshorn



Green Elf Cup



Hairy Curtain Crust

October 2

Walking amongst the trees on today's walk, grey squirrels are scampering everywhere, collecting acorns and nuts, which they bury ahead of the winter famine.

However, behind foxes, grey squirrels are probably the most divisive of our wildlife - they are either entertaining acrobats that bring joy to many or destructive vermin (indeed it is illegal to release a captured grey squirrel into the environment) that are often referred to as tree rats.

For many inner-city children, these amusing creatures are the only wildlife they will see, and many people get great pleasure from feeding them in our parks. On the environmental plus side, every autumn they bury more acorns that they can ever hope to find again, thereby joining jays in planting a vast number of trees.



On the negative side, they cause immense damage to trees by stripping the bark - although the reasons for this behaviour are not fully understood but are probably a combination of using the bark to build their drays and a loving of the sweet layers beneath. Research has identified that trees between 10 and 40-years-old are most at risk (possibly because this is when the bark is at its most palatable).

However, the biggest sin of these American imports is their impact upon our native red squirrels, which now only exist in far-flung parts of the country. The larger greys easily out-compete their smaller cousins for food and habitat. They also spread squirrel pox, which is deadly to the reds, but does not affect the greys.

However, all may not be quite as clear-cut as: greys = bad, reds = good. In a report into squirrel activity I was reading, it appears that before the introduction of grey squirrels around 1876 by Victorian banker, Thomas Brockelhurst, it was the reds that were regarded as a woodland pest, as they share the habit of stripping tree bark. Indeed, in Hampshire county records it is recorded that during the period between 1880 and 1927 in excess of 21,300 reds were shot as 'forestry pests' in the New Forest alone. Food for thought that reds were not always regarded as they are today.

October 4

After a succession of chillier mornings, with a heavy dew and condensation on the windows, this morning is a mild 14C, with neither dew nor condensation.

A lovely walk to work along the North Downs at Chaldon to Botterill's Field, another grazing enclosure in desperate need of our attention. The sun is shining, the sky is mostly blue and the autumn colours are really coming through in the trees and hedgerows.

Along the North Downs Way, acorns crunch beneath my boots and hedges are adorned with deep red haws and the glossy strings of red, orange and green berries of Black Briony.



The early morning sunshine doesn't last long and heavy grey cloud soon rolls in, with the threat of the rain visible away to the south, which thankfully amounts to just a short period of drizzle. There are no signs of the forecast 19C.

Unlike the grazing enclosures of the past couple of weeks this one is in a really overgrown state, covered in head-high hawthorn, mature blackthorn, vicious wild rose, bramble and masses of wild clematis that ties everything together. This is a perfect example of why grazing areas prone to scrubbing requires a supportive programme of brush-cutting and cutting - grazing will not keep the scrub under control.



Sadly, the usual quartet of goats are not in residence. Normally, they would have come over immediately and followed us around all day, keeping us entertained and enthusiastically helping themselves to the tastier leaves as we cut the scrub down.

Even though goats will eat almost everything, this level of scrub is clearly beyond the appetites of 4 goats.



Left to its own devices, this chalk grassland site would soon be lost beneath the rapidly spreading hawthorn. The worst areas of the field are almost impenetrable, covered in a vicious tangle of thorny growth (above and below). Even from the gate (left), unlike the previous enclosures that only revealed their true state close up, the condition of this site is immediately obvious.



At lunch we are treated to a mixed display of birds of prey. Kestrels hunt and hover over the surrounding fields, fighting the stiff breeze coming up the slope and using it to glide over the ground. A red kite glides over the trees above us on the ridge of the Downs and moves effortlessly away across the south-facing slope. A buzzard appears and is quickly mobbed by a small flock of crows that harass it, swooping constantly in an effort to drive it off. A second buzzard appears, which seems to signal a loss of enthusiasm from the majority of the crows. However, one refuses to give up and continues to harass the first buzzard, which turns and jinks, giving of the air of being annoyed, but not seriously threatened by a persistent irritant. Eventually, the buzzards move away, leaving the crow to boast to its mates about its own prowess and possibly mocking them for their cowardice.

By the end of the day we have made great inroads, but my arms are covered in the scratches of battle with all the thorns, which are impossible to avoid – the worst of which are the hooked thorns of wild rose, of which there are masses, trailing up through all the hawthorn and blackthorn, that ensnare clothing and embed themselves in any exposed flesh, refusing to let go. Meanwhile, those of blackthorn deserve the most respect – long and needle-sharp they come with a danger of blood poisoning if pieces of thorn are not removed from the skin.

The Importance of Chalk Grassland

Chalk grassland is a rare environment, mostly confined to the NW of continental Europe and SE England, of which less than 2% remains. Environmentally it is our equivalent of a tropical rainforest. This loss

coincides with the loss over the past 50 years of 97% of England's wildflower meadows, a loss that has had a major detrimental impact upon our wildlife (60% of wildlife species are said to be decline according to the 2015 State of Nature UK report), adding to the sorrowful fact that the UK is one of the world's most nature-depleted nations.

In the south-east chalk makes up the North and South Downs, 2 long ridges that are all that remains of what was once a vast dome of chalk (believed to have been up to a mile high).

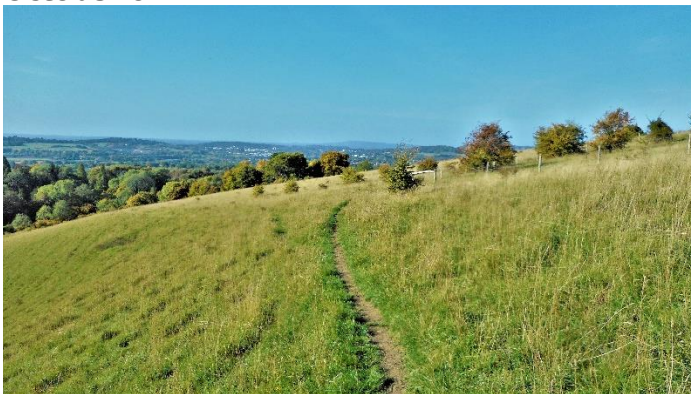
Chalk grassland is exceptionally rich in plants (including many orchids – bee, man, fly, common spotted, pyramidal and fragrant) - and insects, many of which have evolved to take advantage of the wide variety of specialist plants. The nutrient-poor soil makes it difficult for any single plant species to dominate, making for a very diverse habitat – one of the richest in Western Europe. Up to 50 different plant species, including many that are found exclusively on chalk grassland, can be found in a square metre. The species-rich grassland also supports invertebrates and wildlife that are either mostly or completely confined to chalk. Chalk grassland also contains rare species of liverworts, mosses and lichens.

Another advantage of chalk is its ability to naturally filter water that subsequently requires minimal treatment, making it far cheaper of the water companies to extract and supply.

October 5

A grey, blustery morning, giving way to persistent light rain, giving way to much heavier rain. As the rain gets heavier I'm glad to have chosen not to have gone out onto the exposed open hillside.

October 6



In contrast to yesterday, it is a gloriously warm, sunny day on the North Downs.

Today is the last day clearing scrub on the chalk grassland slope in Botterill's Field on the local section of the North Downs, concentrating on the more mature hawthorn scrub towards the top. Most of the hawthorn is head-high, with clusters of close-growing stems, of various ages, interwoven to create a single entangled mass.

Most of the time, this requires all the stems to be cut before a single stand can be removed (below right). After the first day I have opted for longer sleeves to protect my scratched arms. A wide-brim hat is also a good choice for getting into the whippy, thorny branches.

The next challenge is to drag the thorny bundle across the slope to deposit it beneath the stand of mature trees in the corner of the field, where the numerous piles are rapidly growing – we are only allowed one fire site and the one we used at the start of the year is too far to drag to.

Having got the pile of cut stems balanced to enable it to be easily dragged, it then insists on rolling over, down the slope, needing it to be rebalanced. Then there are all the anthills and stumps, all waiting to trip us. Add to that the mass of thorns pricking our legs and finding a way through our gloves to attack unwary fingers.



During the entire day we are treated to another display of red kites, buzzards and kestrels, often coming so close that all their details can be clearly seen. Added to these is a flock of house martins, swooping and soaring over our heads, before disappearing as quickly as they appeared.



There is far too much scrub to deal with in the limited time of a single visit, but by the end we have made great inroads into what was there (left).

Hopefully, we can return to complete the job and to ensure that the field doesn't get into this state again. At least, when they return, the goats will have a better chance of doing their job.

October 7

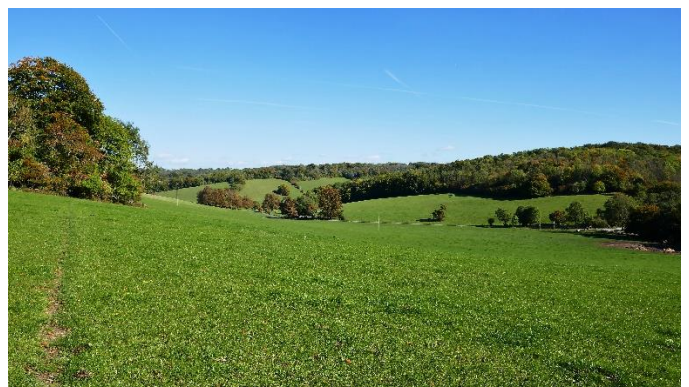
Passing Caterham Valley's St John's church today I do a double-take when I spot a patch of crocuses... in October!

A common late winter flower, I haven't come across the autumn variety (Saffron Crocus) until today. Always finding something new and fascinating



October 8

Today's walk takes in another local section of the North Downs in the glorious warm sunshine, across the countryside and hills of Tillingdown, Woldingham, Winders Hill and Caterham Viewpoint.



And along the way the sunlight picks out the early autumn colours, with the best still to come.



October 9

The names of the full moons of September and October are based upon the Autumn Equinox, with the moon occurring closest to the equinox being called the Harvest Moon (this year Sep 10). This year's October full moon occurs today and is called the Hunter's Moon – it is the time of year when sunset and moonrise are closer together than normal and is therefore the perfect time for hunting.



October 10

After a wet morning, a glorious October afternoon in the local woods (at the back of White Knobs Rec in Caterham Valley), where the low autumn sun highlights the canopy, spotlights individual leaves, casts lengthening shadows and increases the contrast between light and dark.





October 11

According to old folklore, when Satan was thrown out of heaven on Old Michaelmas Day (Oct 11), he landed in a blackberry bush. In a fit of rage, he is said to have spat (or worse) on the blackberries, making them inedible. As a result, it has become traditional that the fruit should never be picked after this day.



A clear blue morning sky through which the near full moon is dipping down towards the tree-lined ridge across the valley.

The overnight temperature has dropped below freezing for the first time this autumn, leading to the heavy evening dew freezing on the car windscreen.

This week sees a return to Banstead Woods for a couple of days helping with creating a dead hedge in the latest coppice site. The hedge, made from the harvested timber and brash from the coppiced hazel, forms a wildlife friendly barrier around the coppice site (coupe or panel).

The hedge will provide security, habitat and a safe corridor for many different wildlife species – invertebrates, small mammals and birds. It will also help to keep out the deer that love to eat the succulent new buds of the hazel regrowth.



The hedge is made by having 2 rows of stakes (left), placed approx 18ins apart, that are held together by weaving a succession of binders along the top of each row. The centre is then piled with all the brash and timber (right).



Depending upon the conditions the hedge will start to deteriorate after just a few years, by which time the regrowth should be tall enough to avoid the attentions of the deer.

The lack of suitable stakes means that it is not going to be possible to complete the hedge around the whole site, so we decide to make use of the thick patch of brambles at the rear of the site as a natural barrier, supplemented by a piling a lot of the brash from the coppicing to add thickness and depth to block possible access paths.

By the afternoon it is a glorious mild, sunny day, perfect for a tranquil walk through the surrounding woods, where the colours are turning, creating splashes of bright oranges, yellows and reds amongst the mass of green.

The sunlight picks out small clusters of golden yellow leaves – oak, sweet chestnut and beech.

There is noticeably more light hitting the ground along the wider paths, which will increase day by day as the canopy dwindles as autumn progresses towards winter.

Long shadows are cast across the woodland floor, as the sun hangs lower in the sky.

Tens of thousands of acorns are thickly strewn across the woodland floor, with hundreds more clattering down through branches and off trunks, hitting the ground all around me as I walk.

Bracken is turning yellow and bronze.

The green spiky balls of sweet chestnut have split and spilled their glossy contents.



October 13

I regularly pass Chipstead's Elmore pond on my way home from working in Banstead Woods and along Chipstead Downs. As a result, it has become my barometer of the impact of this exceptionally dry and record-breaking year.

By mid-July the pond had been reduced to a small puddle (below left) and was close to disappearing entirely during August. During September the arrival of much-needed rain started to reverse the pond's fortunes, although nowhere near enough to see it return to normal.

Passing it today (below right), the water has spread a little further, but is still way off the pond's normal size and level.



October 15

35 years ago tonight (15/16 Oct 1987) nature unleashed its fury across the south of England, downing an estimated 15 million trees and causing damage of approx £2,000 million, with 3 million households without power for 3 days. Sadly, it also took the lives of 19 people. It was a night that no one who lived through it will ever forget.

The Great Storm of '87 was unusual in that very few storms of this magnitude track close to the south-east. Some coastal and inland gusts exceeded 100mph (116mph was recorded at Shoreham in Sussex). It was made all the more exceptional by coming from the south, when the prevailing strong winds tend to come from the west or south-west. This meant that the root system of most trees, which grow to counter the prevailing winds, were not as able to readily cope with the change of direction. Add to this the fact that most trees were in full leaf (causing them to catch the wind like a sail) and the fact that heavy rains had left the ground saturated and you had the perfect combination for the disaster that unfolded.

In Kent 90% of the county's roads were blocked and most of the train network was halted, something I became well aware of as I tried to help a friend move house the following morning. I lost count of the number of narrow winding country roads we had to reverse back down as we found our way blocked by giant fallen trees – I learnt a lot about driving backwards that morning!! We weren't too far from the town of Sevenoaks, which overnight became 'One Oak'.

It was said to be a once-in-a-200-year-event, but it was followed less than 3 years later by another fierce storm that brought down another 5 million trees. Many of trees brought down by these 2 storms still litter the countryside, rotting monuments to the fierce power of nature.



After and before the Great Storm at Emmett's Garden, Toys Hill (Kent)

October 18

An unbelievably mild day, continuing the spell of glorious October weather. A clear, chilly start leads on to an afternoon temperature of 20C. The sky is a clear blue, with not a wisp of cloud over Hooley Meadows (below) for the first of a couple of days of brush-cutting and scrub clearance.

The morning grass is thick with dew, glistening in the low sun like a covering of frost. Cobwebs in the grass and across the corners of gates are bejewelled with countless droplets of water. The leaves of the hawthorn bushes are a mix of yellows and reds. Pink spindle berries, red haws and plump purple sloes add further autumn colour. Few wildflowers remain, but the field is dotted with the yellow Common Ragwort, the white of Yarrow, Pignut and Hogweed, and the blue of Self Heal, while the crushed leaves of Wild Marjoram still give off fragrant reminders of a chalk grassland summer.



A hard day of brush-cutting in the lower of the 2 fields, clearing along the line of the local butterfly transect, which runs along the back of a thick belt of mixed blackthorn, dogwood, spindle, thick bramble, dog rose and wild clematis.

The whole length (approx. 120m) is densely covered in trailing brambles, many of which grow up into the surrounding scrubby trees. There are also patches of young dogwood, nettles and buddleia. A real tangled mess (right). I don't know how a butterfly transect is conducted through here.

With the hard work involved in brush-cutting and tugging out the thorny bramble ropes in the rising temperature, the sweat is soon pouring!

By the end of the day the brush-cutting is complete and there is a mass of raking left to deal with tomorrow.



As well as opening up the transect path, this will create a corridor for the butterflies, primarily Speckled Woods, to use along the edge of the site.

Meanwhile, work is underway to reduce and thin out the dense scrub that I'm brush-cutting along the back edge of.

October 19

Another lovely mid-October day, not quite as blue as yesterday, but still very sunny and mild.



Start the day with raking up and disposing of all the arisings from yesterday's brush-cutting and clearing the low branches overhanging the butterfly transect path.

With the path cleared it would be good to see it maintained as, despite how it looks at the completion of the brush-cutting, there is a mass of bramble waiting to return next season. This would benefit from cutting twice, as has been done elsewhere (such as The Knoll on Chipstead Downs and Banstead Woods orchard), once around May as it is emerging again and then again in autumn. This would prevent it from taking over and would be a perfect job for a couple of scythes.

Talking of site transects, the transect season is now over but there are a few butterflies about – small coppers and red admirals –making the most of the autumn sunshine. However, what would really help the invertebrates of the site would be an end to the summer grazing which removes all the flowers that provide the food they need to thrive.

With the raking completed I can join in with the work clearing and thinning the dense patch of blackthorn and dogwood scrub (right top – before, right below – after), taking care to leave most of the spindle, with their lovely pink berries and contrasting bright orange seeds (below).

Despite the warm day it's nice to have a fire once again, which rapidly eats the arisings from the clearance work.

Meanwhile, a buzzard and a red kite circle high overhead on the thermals.



October 20

We were so lucky with the glorious weather of the past couple of days at Hooley Meadows, as this morning sees a complete change to misty, wet weather, with bursts of heavy rain. The scheduled hazel copping in Banstead Woods has been cancelled.

October 21 – National Apple Day

Amazingly, there are an estimated 2,300 traditional UK apple varieties (eaters, cookers, dessert and cider), with such wonderful names as William Crump, Tydemans Late Orange, Dainty Maids, Peasgood's Nonsuch, Scarlet Nonpareil, Kenchy Pippin, Crackstalk, Pitmaston Pineapple, Slack-ma-Girdle, Court Pendu Plat, Allington Pippin, Ribston Pippin, Arlingham Churchyard, Lodgemore Nonpareil, Laxton's Superb, Cornish Gilliflower, Keswick Codlin, Netherton Nonesuch, Knobby Russet, Reinette Ananas, Welsh Druid, Leathercoat, Holbert's Victoria, Howgate Wonder, Foxwelp, Landy's Finger of Lancaster, Flower of the West, Taynton Codlin, Pedington Brandy, Old Tankard, Beauty of Bath, Bloody Ploughman, Nine of Diamonds, Chiver's Delight and Wadey's Seedling (believed to be a local Caterham variety recorded in 1919). However, the one with the least appetising name is probably Hen's Turds (a heritage variety from Glocstershire)! How sad it is that the vast majority of these have been all but forgotten except for in a few remaining heritage orchards.

In the UK we chomp our way through more than 48,000 tonnes of apples every year, although only about a third are actually grown here, with most consumers opting for just one or two varieties imported from abroad – even at the height of the apple season our supermarkets are filled with produce from France, Holland, the US, New Zealand and South Africa. It therefore seems wholly appropriate to have a day to celebrate and promote our homegrown apples and produce, including juices, ciders (the best use for an apple I know!) and fruit pies.

So, if you are shopping for apples, look out for British varieties and maybe try a new variety. And, if your local supermarket fails to stock a reasonable range of varieties, have a word with the manager and ask why they aren't doing more to support local British producers.

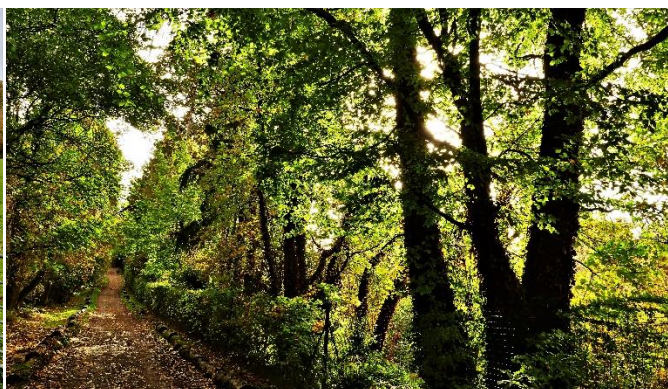
October 22

Sunshine is in short supply, but at least the rain of the past couple of days has blown through, so it's a good opportunity to don the boots and head out into the surrounding countryside – this time taking in the nearby Woldingham village.

Beneath Woldingham viaduct, take the hedge-lined track (access road to Woldingham school - below), which passes beneath a narrower railway bridge (right) to Woldingham station, where I can cross the railway line.



From the station, turn into Church Rd, passing the few cars that are parked for the station – on a weekday these would be bumper to bumper along the whole tarmac section of the road. As it climbs the road soon becomes a rougher track, looking suddenly very autumnal. The ground is muddy from the recent rain and the exposed flints slippery. Oily puddles lay where the water has mixed with the droppings from the passing horses. The ground around the field gates is deep in pock-marked mud where the horses have passed through. Red Kites and Buzzards circle over the open horse fields. Many of the exposed trees are almost bare, their leaves having hardly had a chance to turn colour before dropping. The fall of leaves is especially thick where the track narrows and passes ever more steeply between rows of trees and through woodland, where houses suddenly appear in the gaps. Bored-looking horses hang their heads out of their stable blocks watching my progress and probably envying the other horses out in the fields.



Stop off at St Agatha's church (right) at the top of the track, said to be the smallest church in Surrey. As per every other visit the door is locked, so I still await the chance to look inside.



On the way down from the village I detour to pass along the restored chalk grassland on Long Hill, where we have worked for the past 15 years, clearing scrub and trees, brush-cutting and conducting wildflower surveys in the summer. This is the only part of the walk interrupted by a brief burst of rain sweeping across the slope, blurring the wonderful view of the surrounding countryside, to give way to an equally brief burst of sunshine.



The last of the wildflowers are doing their best to hang on – Yarrow, Field Scabious and Harebells catch my attention. Ranks of dried Hemp Agrimony stand tall across one end of the grassland and beside the lower of the 2 paths. Their numbers were depleted through treating earlier in the year, but I can only wonder at how many thousands of seeds have been spread by those that escaped. Diseased ash trees stand beside the path, already naked and largely branchless. We are scheduled to be working here in the coming week for the annual brush-cutting and maybe a bit of tree clearance. Having taken the opportunity to grab a few 'before' photos it's time to head back towards home.

Unusual to see a Starling at the garden bird feeders. Every year until now they have all disappeared by late summer at the end of the breeding season. Must keep an eye out to see if it is a regular visitor. Female Great Spotted Woodpecker at the garden suet block feeder. This one is not as skittish as usual – they usually fly off at the sight of any movement at one of the windows – so it could be that this is the juvenile that appeared earlier in the summer that has now taken on its adult plumage.

Darkness comes earlier and earlier, especially on such a gloomy afternoon, with the impending prospect of the clocks going back next weekend. It's a deadline that drives me to make the most of the rapidly dwindling longer days.

October 23

Glad that I took the opportunity to get out for yesterday's walk as this morning is VERY wet!

There is a break during the middle of the day before the sky turns slate grey from the south, followed by thunder and great flashes of lightening and torrential rain.

The storm clears away to leave an amazing dusty pink-orange sky (below).

After dark the heavy showers return. Going out late, there is standing water everywhere, masses of leaves down from where they have been battered into submission by the rain.



October 24

For many years I have started my day by looking across the valley at the wooded hillside opposite, watching the endless cycle of the seasons. From spring to summer to autumn to winter, each season has its own distinctive appearance. Now is very much autumn, with the changing palette of colours and the early bareness of the trees along the exposed ridge.



Unusual to see a pair of Starlings still about at this time of year. Every year they suddenly appear just ahead of the nesting season and depart in late summer once the fledglings can fend for themselves, not to be seen until the following year.

October 25

Today is the start of the annual autumn brush-cut and scrub/tree clearance work on Woldingham's Long Hill (where I was walking just a couple of days ago).



The restored chalk grassland slope at Long Hill. At the top of the slope is a footpath (known as Madeira Walk – named by the First World War soldiers who were camped nearby after the Lavada walks on Madeira). At the bottom of the slope is a bridleway.



The grassland slope brush-cut and raked. Removing the cut vegetation is important for a couple of reasons:

- *If left it would form a thick carpet of thatch that would suppress the regrowth.*
- *As it rots it will leech nutrients to enrich the soil, encouraging the tougher grasses and vegetation to thrive to the detriment of the more delicate wildflowers that prefer nutrient-poor soil.*



The newest area of restored chalk grassland below the lower path.



The newest area of restored chalk grassland brush-cut and raked.

The photo (right) shows the site at around 1920, showing that it was a lot more open.

The path just left of centre is the upper footpath (Madeira Walk). The road that disappears off the right edge is the existing Long Hill. The lower path didn't exist at that time and was cut into the slope at some later date.

Interesting to see how open the slope was 100 years ago.



In action on the lower slope.

With 4 brush-cutter going, by the end of the day both areas of restored chalk grassland are cut and the cut vegetation raked off.

The brushcutting is relatively easy, with the main challenge being the steepness of the slope. Most of the tree stumps left over from the clearance work are rotten enough for the brush-cutter blades to slice through rather than bounce off. However, there are quite a few flints that explode, sending splinters flying. There is also a quartet of concrete blocks hidden in the tall grass that thankfully I spot before the blade hits them. I'll make sure that they get moved so that they don't cause a problem with next year's brush-cutting.

A mostly dry day, with just a couple of brief sharp showers blowing across the slope. Although rain is an habitual challenge at this time of year, it is preferable for it to arrive when we are working in the shelter of the woods than when we are out on an exposed slope.

Red Kites and Buzzards are frequent visitors, circling overhead, while a flock of Redwings suddenly pass over as we are stopped for lunch.

October 26

A mostly sunny and mild day, although with a very stiff breeze, especially along the footpath at the top of the slope at Long Hill.

After most of the grassland brush-cutting and raking was completed yesterday, there is enough work for just one brush-cutter clearing along the sides of the lower path.

Meanwhile, I start work along the upper path (Madeira Walk), clearing back some of the low, overhanging branches and stems – mostly from hazel, which gives me the opportunity to do some coppicing, which is one of my favourite tasks.



Clearing the tall, dense vegetation from around the bench we installed last spring, revealing the amazing view out over the surrounding countryside.



Before: Vegetation (mostly hemp agrimony and young dogwood) encroaching along the lower bridleway.

After: Path cleared of encroaching vegetation.

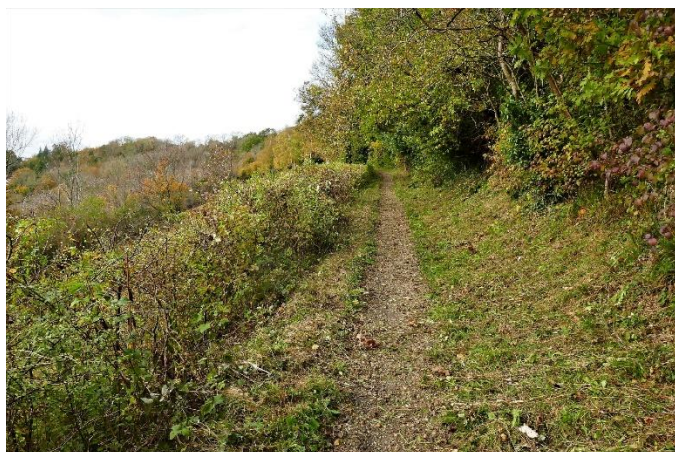
The unusually mild temperature continues after dark, with the overnight temperature forecast to not fall below 15C, which is the average daytime temperature for the end of October. Meanwhile, the current daytime temperature of 18C to 20C is the average for June. This highly unusual year continues.

October 27

The early morning rain soon clears to give way to another midland mostly sunny day, without yesterday's stiff breeze.

Yet again there are plenty of sightings of Red Kites, Buzzards and hovering Kestrels. From the top path I find myself almost level with the kestrels hunting over the grassland slope. While enjoying lunch on the lower bridleway I catch sight of a Red Kite dropping to the grassland before rapidly rising and disappearing over the trees. All of which just adds to my love of this particular site.

A good day's progress coppicing some of the hazel and clearing overhanging branches and stems from the top path. At the same time the hedge-trimmer is making short work of reducing the height of the overgrown hedge between the path and the top of the grassland slope. The work along the path is completed by brush-cutting along the edges to remove the encroaching vegetation and woody growth (dogwood, blackthorn and spindle). The photo below left shows the completed combined clearance work along one section of the footpath and how much more light is allowed in, while also opening up the great view (below right).



October 28

It is that time of year when social media is again flooded with 'well meaning' suggestions to take unwanted pumpkins to the local woods or park, or to put them out in the garden for wildlife.

I would urge you to please NOT dump pumpkins in local woods or park. When I have posted this in the past I have received comments that this does not happen. Well, I can assure you it does – this photo shows some of the pumpkins dumped last year on Chipstead Downs.



1. You have no right to dump your waste food on land owned by someone else (even common land is owned and managed by local authorities). At the very least have the courtesy to get the agreement of the landowner first. Without permission you are effectively fly-tipping.
2. Autumn is the season of nature's bounty – the countryside is full of seeds, nuts, berries and fungi - the wildlife does not need your pumpkins. Pumpkins are not native to this country and do not grow wild, so no wildlife has evolved a dependence upon them.
3. Possibly most importantly, far from helping wildlife it can make some, such as our declining hedgehogs, ill if they eat it! (which could be fatal so close to hibernation when condition, bodyweight and fat reserves are crucial to survival). From discussions I've had it seems that it can also cause colic in horses. Additionally, large pieces can present a choke hazard to all animals.
4. The additional nutrients carried by pumpkins and other forms of organic waste can alter soil nutrient levels and have a detrimental impact upon the flora, especially those that have evolved to thrive upon nutrient-poor soil (such as many of the chalk grassland wildflowers).
5. In my experience of working in the countryside, pumpkins are rarely touched by wildlife. Instead, they are left to rot, creating a horrible soggy, stinking mess for someone else to clear up.
6. As vegetable matter rots it produces methane, one of the worst of the greenhouse gases impacting Climate Change.
7. Dumped food attracts rats and the diseases they spread. If you wish to risk attracting rats into your own garden that is obviously entirely up to you, although it might not impress the neighbours.

An estimated 18,000 tonnes of pumpkin gets thrown away at Halloween - about the weight of 1,500 double decker buses! Just think about that. What a disgraceful waste of food at a time when an increasing number of people are reliant upon foodbanks to feed their families. And then there is all the methane produced as it all rots.

If you must waste food, then why not contact a local wildlife/pet rescue centre to see if they can make use of your pumpkins.

October 29

A gloriously sunny and unseasonably warm (22C) day for the end of October. Wonderful to be sitting at Caterham Viewpoint on the ridge of the North Downs, in a short-sleeved shirt, watching the kestrels hovering and hunting over the open grassland.

Meanwhile, in the woods behind the Viewpoint autumn is in full swing – the canopy is dwindling, allowing in an increasing amount of light in to highlight the thick bronze carpet of beech leaves.



Autumn has reached the tipping point between the departure from summer and the anticipation of winter and nowhere is this transition more noticeable than in our woodland. The rich palette of colours that adorn the trees, the yellows, golds, reds and purples, as spectacular as it is, will be short-lived, awaiting the icy blasts that will leave the complex structures of the trees bare. The heavy dew that greets the morning, bejewelling myriad cobwebs strung across hedges and brambles will soon be replaced by crisp frosts. Even the quality of the light has changed from the harsh light of summer to a soft mellow light that lends a magical air to the woodland – it is also a great light for taking photographs, so now is a good time to get out into the countryside with a camera.

This particular woodland covers the gentle slope up to the ridge of the North Downs and I consider myself to be very fortunate to have it, if not exactly on my doorstep, then at least within walking distance. In this day of the extensive use of the motor car it wouldn't surprise me to discover that the vast majority of people living locally don't even know that it's here. Not that I'm complaining, as a wood without the constant chatter of people is a place to be lost in one's thoughts, a place to connect with the natural world and a place where wildlife can be seen before it is frightened off.

The few leaves that remain on a horse chestnut are brown and scrunched and the last of its heavily encased fruit hangs from a bare branch. Most have fallen and lay split open upon the ground, the fruit with their glossy jackets spilling from the creamy insides. A breeze brings a handful of brown leaves fluttering to the ground, their spiralling journey audible in the stillness as they flick off branch and trunk.

The grass beneath a sycamore is littered with the winged fruit that has spiralled to earth to rest amongst the litter of pink and yellow leaves.

A gentle breeze disturbs the fallen leaves of a giant beech, sending them rolling and swirling lazily along the woodland floor. It seems incredible that a single tree can consist of so many leaves. Looking up into its huge canopy, the majority of them are now turning to a mix of yellow and a deep burning copper. The thick, smooth grey trunk divides into three massive limbs, any one of which would make a respectable tree. These divide again and again, the branches reaching up and out before gently curving under the tremendous weight. Empty husks of beech mast lie amongst the leaves and all around more pitter-patter to the ground.

Oak leaves are rapidly fading to shades of yellow. Soon they too will relinquish their hold and join the scattering of brown acorns that the squirrels and jays have yet to find. They have the perfect relationship, the oak providing food to see them through the winter ahead, while nature relies upon the fact that they will plant far more into the earth than they can ever hope to remember. At that moment a squirrel chases through the canopy, shedding stealth for speed, sending down a cascade of leaves.

Soft red fruit decorate the yew, bright red berries ornament holly and deep red haws dot the hawthorn, although they have now aged and lost their fresh lustre. A few elder branches still droop with the weight of bunches of shiny dark purple-black berries, while duller black fruit hang from dogwood and the blackthorn hangs onto its displays of purple-black sloes. The remains of fruit adhere to brambles, a few bright berries amongst the majority, now dried and shrivelled. Country wisdom has it that trees heavy with berries are a sign of a hard winter to come. However, the abundance of berries has more to do with the preceding months than the succeeding ones.

The random path winds between thick green patches of dog's mercury, the only greenery visible on the woodland floor carpeted with fallen leaves and empty seed husks. The earth is cool and damp and gives off a rich, heady aroma of over-ripeness and decay as the thick humus is kicked over. It is an aroma that belongs only to woodland in the autumn.

Fallen trees and limbs are carpeted in thick green moss and decorated with fluttering leaves and fungi, delicately pale and wispy, and bright and globular. Delicate silken webs are signs of colonisation. A long-legged spider tucks itself into a shallow crevice to hide, while numerous insects hover above the path, the sun shining through their gossamer wings.

The path is lost beneath the thick layer of leaves, and my footfalls noisily snap dozens of dry twigs, causing birds to suddenly take to the air. Wood pigeons flap noisily as they struggle to get their massive bulks airborne, while great tits erupt from a thick belt of brambles. A movement to my right draws my attention to two roe deer that stop their browsing, suddenly aware that they are not alone, then take off noiselessly, stealthily, yet unhurriedly through the trees, as though either sensing that I pose little threat or assessing my lack of athletic prowess. A glimpse of turned heads is followed by a flash of white under tail, then they are lost from sight amongst the dense growth of trees. I listen for their movement but all I hear is the breeze in the canopy.

An expansive stand of whitebeam shares not a single leaf between them. Instead, they form a dense carpet of pale and dark brown, an intricate sepia mosaic that rustles and crackles beneath my feet and constantly shifts as the breeze rearranges the pieces. Here the woodland is open and airy, enclosed by a

linear bank that may have once designated a long-forgotten boundary, beyond which the beech take over and the woodland is in shade again.

Here, a giant casualty of a great storm, stands, its stunted smooth grey trunk jagged and torn where each of its limbs has been ripped violently from their sockets to form living archways adorned with clusters of autumnal leaves.

Fungi is suddenly everywhere, in a wide variety of guises –

- Turkey Tail
- Wrinkled Peach (below)



- Lumpy Bracket
- Southern Bracket
- Yellow Brain fungus (below)



- Candlesnuff (below)



- Purple Jellydisc
- Glistening Inkcaps
- Fairy Inkcaps (below)



- Hairy Curtain Crust
- Cramp Balls (King Alfred's Cakes)
- Oysterling
- Honey Fungus

The passing of the seasons is not just evident in the woods around me, it is also within me as I regret the passing of the summer and anticipate the coming of winter. Yet this transition is neither a beginning nor an ending but merely a point in time upon the endless cycle, for even now there are signs of life to come. A stand of hazel is hung with tightly-closed pale green catkins, and there are new buds on beech, on sycamore, on horse chestnut, in fact everywhere I look there are signs of nature already preparing itself for the spring to come.

October 30

If asked to name my least favourite day of the year, the one when the clocks go back an hour would be very high on that list, if not streets ahead of all the other possible candidates. The gradual lengthening of the evening darkness is a timeless natural occurrence, the sudden unnecessary addition of another hour of evening darkness is not. Surely, in a world of modern communications the moving backwards and forwards of the clocks is an archaic, pointless exercise that has a huge impact upon those who suffer through the darker months.

5pm – The light is fading very fast and it is almost dark already. It will be a few months before daylight returns to this time of day.

October 31

Although today is celebrated as Halloween (and by the church as All Saints Eve), its significance goes back much further to the Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced sow-in). Falling midway between the Autumn Equinox and the Winter Solstice it marked the end of the harvest season and the end of the Celtic year. It was the time when cattle were brought back down from the summer pastures and when livestock were slaughtered for the winter.

It was a time to reflect upon the fortunes of the year past, to complete unfinished business and to remember those who had passed over, and it was a time to look forward and make plans for the coming year. It was also a time when the veil between the real and spirit worlds was believed to be at its thinnest and cleansing fires were lit as part of the celebrations to ward off any evil spirits that may have crossed over. The spirits of the dead were also thought to revisit their homes seeking hospitality and feasts were held at which a place was set at the table for them.

Today, it is a time to get creative, dressing up (the traditional 'mummers' who enacted plays and scenes to celebrate the festival were heavily into disguise) and carving faces into pumpkins. However, if you want to be truly traditional, replace those pumpkins with turnips (known as Jack O'Lanterns) – as pictured, although they are quite a bit more fiddly but a lot quicker to carve.

Jack O'Lanterns originate from a fable in which a trickster, Jack, tries to outsmart the Devil by fooling him into agreeing never to collect his soul. However, once Jack dies it turns out he's led too sinful a life to get into heaven, but because of his bargain with the Devil he can't get into hell either. Jack complains about how dark it is, wandering around earth with no place to go, and someone tosses him a hot coal, which he places in a hollowed-out turnip. Now poor Jack uses his turnip-lantern to guide him, and he is known as Jack of the Lantern. According to some versions, Jack comes out only on Halloween night, looking for someone to take his place... so watch out if you see someone holding up a glowing turnip wandering your way!



When the tradition originally made its way across the Atlantic, turnips were replaced with pumpkins, which were more plentiful (they were not native to Britain) – a tradition that then re-crossed back into Britain, where turnips now rarely feature (unless I can start a revival!).

While the idea of ghosts, witches and things that go bump in the night might be considered a bit of Halloween fun, it should be remembered that our ancestors firmly believed in the supernatural. In a time before modern science and advanced medicine to explain things, the blame for 'weird' happenings often fell upon the elderly (at a time when few people lived past their 40s) and the 'different' – this was not a time to stand out from the crowd. And so it was that many totally innocent people, especially knowledgeable women and the mentally ill, were persecuted under the supposed crime of witchcraft.

England's first formal Witchcraft Act came into force in Henry VIII's reign in 1542, opening the floodgates on witch-hunting. Everything from petty arguments and rivalries to political manoeuvring to ill-luck and illness to failed harvests led to accusations of witchcraft. Encouraged by the church and state the witch-hunts fed on fear and panic to assert their power over ungodliness and pagan beliefs.

Prosecutions were based upon forced confessions (obtained through torture, especially involving sleep deprivation) rather than upon evidence, with the accused being 'encouraged' to name their accomplices to boost the conviction rates and reputations of the witch-hunters. What little evidence gained was often through malicious testimony or the appearance on the accused of an unusual scar, birthmark or insensitive spot – regarded as the mark of the Devil.

Surprisingly, given the zeal of the witch-hunters, not all the accused were executed - there were a few just judges who were not prepared to convict on flimsy evidence and even if convicted, punishment could range from public humiliation to banishment. However, those sentenced to death were hanged – burning at the stake is mostly mythical (although in Scotland witches were strangled and their bodies burned). It is impossible to know how many witches were executed, although in Britain the number of believed to be in the low thousands.

By the late 1600s science was starting to replace superstition and by the end of the century the witch trials had run out of steam, although the Witchcraft Act wasn't repealed until 1736.

So, maybe as well as the usual revelry, we should take a few moments out at Halloween to remember all those innocent people who lost their lives for nothing more than being seen as different.

And so we reach the end of October, a month that brought much-needed rain but also unseasonably high temperatures, especially in the latter half, where the overnight temperature equalled the month's expected average, while the daytime temperatures were more usual for June.