

Urban Countryman

Monthly Field Notes

March 2022

March, the month that is said to come in like a lion and go out like a lamb. Although this is rarely true it is a month often marked by turbulent and changeable weather, spring-like one day and winter the next – I remember walking along the bank of the Thames just outside Oxford one mid-March (Easter was early that year) and having to take shelter in the riverside pub – a really tough decision! - from the snow that was blowing horizontally along the river. In 2018 the start of March saw heavy snowfalls as the 'Beast from the East' struck, not once but twice; while the last day of March the previous year was one of the warmest on record at 20C, while March 30 last year the temperature reached 24C in London – the warmest March day since 1968.

March is the month of the Spring (Vernal) Equinox (considered by many to be the official start of spring) and the start of the hours of daylight increasing over the hours of darkness, the month of the clocks going forward (27th) at the start of British Summer Time, birdsong filling the air as nesting takes priority, the start of spring, of daffodils, blossom and woodland flowers emerging in ever greater profusion, of butterflies adding colour to the transitioning countryside, of migrating birds starting to return and of pregnant ewes getting ready to lamb.

During the course of the month daylight will increase by nearly 2 and a half hours in Scotland and nearly 2 hours in southern England.

March is the month of rebirth and hope, the month that lifts the spirits after the dark of winter, especially after a mostly grey and dismal February. March, the month that makes you smile, especially upon hearing the first skylarks.

March 1

The first day of meteorological spring (astronomical spring does not start until the spring equinox later in the month) and the month that is said to come in like a lion has come in more like a damp squib – very grey, rainy, misty, chilly, drizzly, mizzly and any other ‘izzly’ word you can think of. Not very spring-like at all.

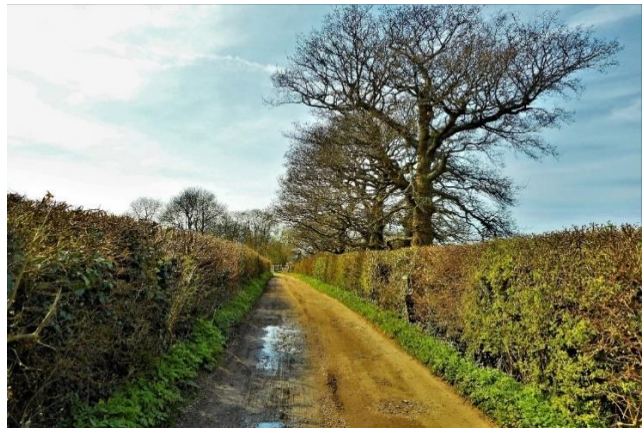
March 2

Not for the first time an explosion of white and grey feathers in the garden is evidence of another fat wood pigeon that had failed to lumber into the air fast enough. Apart from the feathers there are no remains, so either the resident fox got lucky or there is an exceptionally bald pigeon flying about.

March 4

With spring in the air and warmer weather in the offing, it’s a perfect day to get the boots on, grab the camera and get out for a walk along the local section of the North Downs. Despite a bit of a chill the sun feels wonderful on my face, adding cheer to the thought that another winter has passed. Sometime it would be lovely, not to mention challenging, to do the whole 156-mile North Downs Way walk from the far west of Surrey and the wonderfully named Hog’s Back, looping around Canterbury and thence down to the Kent coast at Dover, taking in the rural beauty that can still be found in this crowded part of the country, criss-crossed as it is by major roads and railway lines and dotted with urbanisation. However, for now I think I’ll concentrate on just the small local Chaldon section.

For much of the walk the muddy path, scattered with water-filled potholes, passes between thick hedgerows that are alive with birds – sparrows, dunnocks, robins, bluetits, great tits and chaffinches - chattering noisily as they hop along the hedge and sweep across the path from one side to the other. Occasionally, one will perch on top of a flailed branch to check my progress before diving into the thorny interior. A blackbird shrieks its alarm call before scudding low through a gap. Disturbed by the sudden flurry of activity



a pair of fat wood pigeons stop their grazing in an adjacent field and lumber into the air. Then, just as suddenly, all is peaceful again.

The hedges, left at head height and are thick and in good condition, acting as a windbreak that enables me to fully enjoy the warming sun. Buds on the mix of hawthorn and hazel that make up the hedgerows appear suddenly plumper. The hazel catkins have served their purpose and are in dull decline. Mature oak trees tower over the hedgerow, standing guard.

The path soon narrows and here the hedgerows are less well maintained - they are taller but gappy and, whereas the previous hedge acted as a stock-proof fence, here a rusting iron fence runs behind the row of hawthorn that no longer serve their original purpose. I can’t help but look at it from a hedge-layer’s viewpoint, considering how best to restore it to its former glory. The trees are tall enough, without being too tall, and the gaps are easily bridgeable. It is a while since I last laid a

hedge and the sight of it makes me itch to pick up my axe and billhook again. It is noticeable that there are far fewer birds here and these are mostly wood pigeons. Sadly, so few hedges are traditionally maintained these days – too time consuming and too costly when wire is cheaper and quicker to erect. Where the gaps allow, I am afforded an uninterrupted view away towards the South, across the flat Sussex Weald, towards the distant South Downs, just a smudge on the horizon. Even in the hazy sunshine the view is stunning. How amazing to think that the North and South Downs were once the edges of a giant dome of chalk believed to be up to a mile high. Over thousands of years the dome weathered and eroded to leave just these 2 chalk ridges and the low-level Weald in between.

Green fields are marked out and separated by lines of trees and hedgerows, the nakedness of the trees revealing far more of the landscape than will be seen in summer. Greenhouses, roofs and windows glint in the sunshine, which also highlights the lush paddocks immediately below. Occasional patches of brown indicate where fields have been ploughed and harrowed and possibly planted as the farming cycle continues.

It is not long before the path passes the end of the 300m hedgerow we planted in the freezing conditions of December 2008 and the field where in the following year we searched for an elusive dewpond. Just thinking about it brings a smile to my face.

Dewpond or not a Dewpond?

In a change to our normal countryside activities, we found ourselves in the middle of a field on the North Downs to help with the investigation of a shallow saucer-shaped depression that is thought, by those who know about these sort of things, to be a Victorian dewpond - an artificial pond for the watering of livestock, usually sited at the top of a hill where a natural supply of surface water is not readily available. 'Those who know' assure those of us who are most definitely 'Not in the know' that the depression is the right size, the right shape and in the right place for a dewpond. All I know for certain is that there is a distinctly chilly breeze blowing across the exposed slope.

After a bit of standing around contemplating the depression, followed by some serious discussion, followed by some more contemplation, there is a sudden burst of decisiveness from 'those who know' who, in the best traditions of Time Team, agree to put an exploratory trench across the depression. So, while they carefully remove the topsoil, the rest of us are employed transferring it in wheelbarrows to the far side of the field, where it will be far out of the way, although why it has to be quite so far out of the way is never adequately explained. We do however raise the potential issue of having to wheelbarrow it all the way back again, this time uphill, but are given an intellectual 'we know what we're doing' smile and assured this won't be necessary. In return we give them a 'we hope your right because we're not bloody well moving it back' smile and continue to shunt wheelbarrows back and forth. A late arrival asks me why we are taking the soil all the way across the field, to which I can only reply, 'Because I was told to.' His look says it all.

Meanwhile, back at the dig there is high excitement. It appears that not only is the depression the right size, the right shape and in the right place, a layer of clay and stones, which is declared as the natural lining you would expect for a Victorian dewpond, has just been uncovered. This is the

deal-clincher. The rest of us are suitably impressed and humbled in our ignorance as we continue to transport the endless wheelbarrows across the field.

The discovery and confirmation of their expectations have clearly had an effect on 'those who know', as they have taken pity on the rest of us and allowed us to join in the excitement by helping to excavate the other end of the trench, albeit under the strict understanding that we work slowly and carefully and that we bring any finds to their attention. However, we are not allowed to have our own trowel, they are reserved for the 'serious archaeologists'. Despite the lack of this essential piece of archaeological equipment it is not long before we are making exciting discoveries of our own.

Whereas at the other end clay and stones are all they have to show for their efforts, at our end more interesting finds are quickly being uncovered, starting with a long, narrow piece of iron and what appears to be part of an engine. And if clay and pebbles are enough to indicate a dewpond, evidence of an engine and something that, with a bit (OK, a lot) of imagination, could easily be a propeller blade, clearly indicate to us a possible previously unknown wartime crash site. A stern rebuke from the other end and a denial of any known crash sites in the area do little to stem our mounting excitement as more finds are revealed. We put the lack of enthusiastic response from the other end down to the fact that all they have revealed so far is some boring clay and stones.

A curved piece of iron is listed as either one of the bomb doors or an under-wing bomb rack, while a collection of sheep bones uncover the hitherto unknown top secret experiment conducted towards the end of the war when a shortage of RAF personnel had led to the training of sheep as aircraft navigators. Meanwhile, the tone from the other end indicates that our shocking discovery is not being universally appreciated. In fact, tone and body language are indicating a serious sense-of-humour failure and we fully expect to be asked to leave the site at any moment. But if we leave this important part of our history may never be known. We have a duty to, literally, unearth the full story.

Our next discovery of what is undoubtedly a gear lever attached to what appears to be the gearbox causes the first serious sign of doubt to show on the faces of the 'those who know' camp. The curved engine cowling clearly indicates that, for reasons that temporarily escape our imagination, someone has chosen to bury the large part of a tractor in the ground. What doesn't escape us is the question of what a tractor would be doing in a dewpond. Surely if a dewpond was deep enough to cover a tractor there would be a serious risk of the animals falling in and drowning.

From the other end of the trench, where clay and stones remain their only find, comes a somewhat exasperated, 'It's a bloody rubbish pit.' And with that a halt is called to any further digging, followed by half-hearted claims that at least we have successfully discovered what the depression really is. Our suggestion of burying a plaque for future archaeologists to let them know that it's not a dewpond did little to re-inflate the mood. Instead, we just throw everything back into the hole for someone else to take the credit for uncovering the story of the forgotten ovine navigators.

Remember all the spoil we were assured would not have to be wheelbarrowed back...

All of which has taught me some very good lessons about archaeology (written with apologies to all very knowledgeable archaeologists who bring us an invaluable understanding of the past):

- Finds can be a matter of hit and miss. A trench could be a matter of a few feet away from a major site-defining find. If not for our half of the excavation, the site may well have been designated a Victorian dewpond instead of a rubbish pit and even more time would have been wasted on trying to restore it.
- Finds often present more questions than they answer. Having discovered that it is a rubbish pit, we are none the wiser as to why the hole existed in the first place or why someone chose to bury a tractor, an who knows what else, in it.
- If you begin a search convinced that you already know the answer, everything you subsequently find only helps to justify your original conclusion. A case of being blinded by one's specialism. Sometimes a position of ignorance is the best way to start. It's certainly the most entertaining.
- Never, ever, cart the spoil from a dig to the furthest corner of the site, as it will only greatly annoy everyone (especially those who have to move it) when it has to be carted all the way back again.
- Academics don't like being proved wrong, especially by those who don't have an academic thought in the heads, and in such circumstances, they can fail to see the humour.
- Archaeology seems to be one third based on known facts, one third based upon educated guesses or inventiveness and one third denial (the bits that are best ignored because they don't fit the conclusions pointed to by the other two thirds).

A skylark takes to the air, pouring forth a burbling stream of liquid golden song that immediately soothes the mind and lifts the soul and makes me forget all about dew ponds and rubbish pits. Is there a more beautiful sound in the whole of the countryside? I could stay and listen to it for hours, especially on a day like today.

Passing through a kissing gate, crossing a field that in the summer will be rich with tall grasses and chalk-loving wildflowers, then through another gate with a sign warning about the presence of grazing sheep, I descend through a narrow belt of hawthorn scrub to the edge of the great 'bowl' at Park Ham.

It is like a huge natural amphitheatre, the steep sides of which were carved out 10,000 years ago at the end of the last ice-age when the frozen ground – the ice sheet did not reach this far south - thawed and the top sludge slipped away over the top of the still frozen under layer – a process known as 'solifluction'.



It is a hugely impressive site and the view and tranquillity are worth the journey alone. The steep sweeping sides drop away sharply to the wildflower meadow that in the summer will be covered in yellows and reds and purples that will all pale in comparison to the white sea of ox-eye daisies, thousands upon thousands of them all rippling gently in the breeze.

A rusty old piece of farm machinery, once used for turning hay, sits abandoned on the hillside, a wonderful agricultural sculpture and a reminder of farming before massive industrialisation took hold. From the linkage, this was probably pulled by a tractor but I can easily imagine it working along behind a horse, although I'm not sure I would have fancied being a horse working these slopes. As impressive as big modern machinery is there is something about their older, more basic ancestors that demands one to get out the rose-tinted glasses and imagine a wonderful life of simple pleasures spent working the land, where the sun always shone, rural children, as depicted in Victorian pictures, were always rosy-cheeked and farmers wives had little more strenuous to do than discover where the family chickens had hidden their eggs. However, you don't have to walk very far along the Downs to realise that a day of manoeuvring machinery up and down these slopes, exposed to the wind and the rain and the cold was not always a joyous, life-enriching experience. However, looking back up towards the ridge, with pointed roofs just showing and the clouds floating lazily into view it is hard to imagine a more wonderful place than the English countryside on a warm, sunny day.

One of the great attractions of the North Downs is its variety of habitats. One moment you are walking between thick hedgerows, exploding with birds, then you are walking beside paddocks of ponies and horses or through wildflower meadows before passing through farms with grazing sheep or ploughed fields where wheat, barley, oats, linseed or rapeseed will cover the land in the coming months. A pair of towering trees stand sentinel in the exposed landscape on a strip of grass that marks the boundary between two fields.

The path passes between two giant oaks, one with huge limbs outstretched, as though in protection of the land beneath it, while the other has limbs that corkscrew upwards. Both tower over the hedgerows in which they have stood for centuries in a landscape that is probably little changed, at least as far as the ridge is concerned. Distant mewing reveals a buzzard circling high above the Downs, drifting effortlessly on the updraught. Gradually it moves away towards the west, its movements never hurried, as though it is simply enjoying the pleasure of floating in the sunshine. It makes you wish for release from our earth-bound lives.

This is as far as I intend to go for today. It's time to retrace my steps and head for home. As I reach the point at which I will turn away from the North Downs Way, I stop to take one more look along the rolling hillside and the downland that stretches away into the distance. Sheep graze in a scene that has been played out across pastoral England for centuries. A kestrel, wings outstretched to catch the air, hovers above the field beyond the hedge. The walk that started in sunshine beneath a blue sky ends in sunshine beneath a blue sky, beneath which is endless green divided by hedgerows and crisscrossed by footpaths and bridleways. March and the promise of spring has come to the North Downs. It is the perfect view with which to end my walk.

March 6

It is uplifting to see nearby Manor Park coming back to life as winter gives way to spring.

A rainbow of crocuses – lilac, blue, purple, deep yellow, snowy white, purple-veined.



The spilled gold of Lesser Celandine, scattered in their hundreds.

Primroses are increasing in number. It's strange to think that primroses were once hard to find around our cities as, behind only bluebells, they were the most picked wildflower – something that is now illegal.

Dandelions, the most valuable source of early nectar, are everywhere, enticing the early insects.

Red and blue flowers of Lungwort (right) in clusters amongst the Sweet Violets.

Pungent Wild Garlic Leaves (Ramsons) are emerging beside the old flint wall that was once the walled garden of the long-gone manor house.

A handful of waning Snowdrops remain, their job of bringing cheer to the last day of winter now done.

The first cherry blossom, a brilliant white and densest where the low sun hits the trees full on.





Deathly pale, alien-looking Common Toothwort (left) are emerging beneath the trees along 'The Cloister' avenue of lime trees.

Masses of unassuming and easily overlooked Dog's Mercury, bringing a green carpet to the woodland floor.

A couple of patches of Wood Anemones have flowered early beside the wide track at the bottom of Manor Park beside the railway line.

A Brief History of Manor Park

What we now know today as Manor Park (on the boundary between Caterham and Whyteleafe) is shown on the Portley Estate map of 1720, with field names such as Cock Riddons, Holborn Hill and Burntwood Field [Burntwood La now runs up along the edge of Manor Park]. This and subsequent maps show varying woodland and estate roads.

The main man-made remnant of its past is the old flint wall that is believed to pre-date the first big house. In the corner are the remains of the outer wall of a cottage (listed as the gardener's cottage and wash house), which formed part of the extensive outbuildings belonging to the second big house. This was a simple 2-up 2-down cottage with a central door – the bricked up remains of which can still be seen with bricked-up windows either side. At this time the wall was heightened to form a walled kitchen garden. The wall now encloses Caterham & Whyteleafe Tennis Club.

The first big house, called Manor Cottage was built in 1818. It was extensively enlarged around the 1840s (to include a picture gallery, library, billiard room, aviary, conservatory and estate offices and 14 bedrooms on the first floor) and renamed Caterham Manor. There was also stabling and various farm buildings, greenhouses and 3 cottages (including the remains of the one that can still be seen). An avenue of lime trees was also planted along what was known as the Cloister, which can still be seen today [and is where the common toothwort referred to above can be found].

During the latter part of the 19th century the estate was leased a number of times until it was eventually split into lots and sold off in 1896. By 1898 Warlingham Golf Club had been formed and Manor Park had become a 9-hole course, with manor house as the club house. The green for the first hole was beside what is now the car park at the bottom of the site.

The giant Cedar of Lebanon, which towers over the bottom of the site, was already a substantial tree at the time the golf club took over the park and there are photos of Edwardians relaxing in its shade.

The life of the manor house came to an abrupt end on 18 August 1940 when a raid on nearby RAF Kenley saw a string of bombs dropped along the bottom of Manor Park, extensively damaging the building. The golf club did not survive the war and the park was used for stationing troops, with the flatter areas ploughed for crops.

After the war the then Caterham & Warlingham Urban District Council purchased the land for public use. What remained of the once impressive house was used for storage until that too was demolished in the early 1950s. Fragments of foundations are now hidden amongst the vegetation and the remains of the park railings can still be seen amongst the trees.

Not only does Manor Park have a wonderful spring and summer display of wildflowers in its meadows, it also has a varied collection of trees –

Pedunculate (English) Oak is a great species for finding mosses and lichens.

The towering Cedar of Lebanon with its giant cones.

Himalayan Birch with its smooth white papery bark, mostly planted in parks as an ornamental variety.

Silver Birch.

European Larch, our only deciduous conifer.

Lime, mostly planted in the avenue of trees.

Hazel, covered in catkins.

Robinia, with its deeply fissured, twisted bark.

Rowan.

Holly.

Yew.

Horse Chestnut, with its sticky chestnut buds.

Red Horse Chestnut – a hybrid of a horse chestnut and an American Red Buckeye.

Hornbeam.

Towering beech trees, with younger ones still sporting their brown autumn leaves (a process known as Trancescence).

Wild Cherry.

Spikey Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Cherry Plum (often mistaken for Blackthorn).

Sycamore.

Goat Willow, with its silky 'cat's paw' catkins.

Ash – sadly mostly succumbing to ash dieback disease.

March 7

The woodland at the back of White Knobs Recreation Ground in Caterham Valley is carpeted with the pungent fresh green leaves of Wild Garlic (Ramsons), with patches of Bluebell shoots glowing in the sunshine.



The early afternoon sun is still low enough to cast long shadows of the trees across the ground and along the trunks of their neighbours. The open canopy allows the light to flood in, helping to dry out all but the worst of the muddy paths.

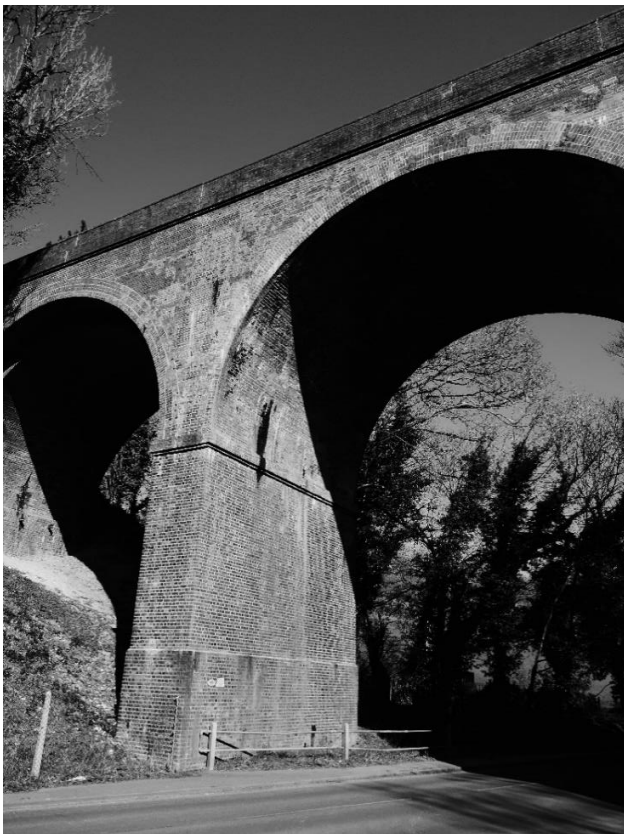
The lush moss, plump with moisture, is picked out by the sunlight and is a vibrant, fresh green, covering logs and fallen trees, softening craggy textures and rough edges.

The signs of last months storms are evident – trunks and limbs violently torn, ripped and splintered. Many of these too will eventually be softened by the progress of the moss.



March 8

A clear, chilly, frosty morning, but nevertheless a gloriously sunny spring day for another local walk. Cutting cross-country to pass beneath the towering viaduct, carrying trains from nearby Woldingham station into London, to where a herd of British Longhorn cattle graze peacefully in the sun.



Stop off at the station (which despite being on a main line into London has all the appearance of a quiet, sleepy country station) to take some black & white photos. Over the winter I have really enjoyed experimenting with the removal of colour to add atmosphere and character to otherwise bland images.



Crossing the platforms and exiting the station, I follow the track before heading across country, following the footpath running along the hillside parallel to the road in the valley that leads towards Woldingham School, then uphill along the path along the edge of Marden Park Wood, with a view down onto the school. The farmland along the valley towards the North Downs Way is lush with fresh green grass.





Climb up out of the far side of the valley towards Tillingdown, with its view along the valley and the wooded hillside opposite (above), before making my way back home.

Spring wildflowers are continuing to emerge in increasing numbers –

Red Dead-nettle (right), which is more purple than red and is neither dead, nor a nettle. This is a plant of scruffy places, but so beloved of early bees that it can be forgiven for not inhabiting the plushiest areas.

The plates of early flowering Common Hogweed (below) make a perfect landing platform for beetles and hoverflie.

The daisy-like Scentless Mayweed (below right).



- Dandelion
 - Lesser Celandine
 - White Dead-nettle (which, unlike its cousin, is at least the colour it claims to be)
 - Daisy
 - Common Field Speedwell
 - Primrose
- Common Ragwort – probably still flowering from last year. Public enemy No1 amongst many horse lovers (plenty more on which I will debate later in the year).
 - Sweet Violet – the smell of violets can be elusive, as it contains a chemical that actually desensitises the receptors in the nose.

March 9

Along Caterham Viewpoint on the North Downs there are more flowers to add to the growing list as the countryside moves into spring –

- Early Dog Violet
- The seemingly ever-present Daisy
- The first Red Campion (below left) on the woodland edge
- Clusters of Periwinkle (below right)



One noticeable thing is the lack of any early butterflies. So far I've not seen any at all. The mostly grey weather hasn't helped, but even on sunny days they have been absent.

With little happening in the garden I venture into the dark confines of the shed to see what could possibly need attention, to discover that the plastic plant pots, hidden for so long in the dark, have seemingly developed an extraordinary propensity for reproducing. I'm certain there are far more than I ever remember stacking in my usual higgledy-piggledy fashion on shelves, in drawers and in corners in the belief that one day they would get sorted and tidied. With nothing else of any urgency until the garden starts to explode with new growth, today is that day!

But where do all these pots come from? They seem to multiply even when no active purchasing of pots or things that come in pots has been undertaken. It remains one of the great mysteries of the shed. There is the usual array of sizes in black, green and terracotta that must once have contained long-forgotten plants that were never seen or heard from again once they entered the ground. Some still have labels attached to at least inform me of the plants that have subsequently failed to show up

in the garden. And then there are their louder cousins, the blues, pinks, purples and yellows that arrived to visit and never left.



So now they are arranged by size, shape and colour and placed back in a far neater arrangement than how they were found. But I do this in the sure-fire knowledge that once the shed door is closed, they will be getting up to what plant pots with too much time on their hands get up to. I know that the next time I visit the shed the neat stacking will be a figment of my imagination and that there will be far more of them than there was when I arranged them this time.

March 10

A gloriously warm, sunny day – so much for the forecast of another grey day. By early afternoon it is t-shirt weather!

On the way out I encounter a tired-looking Buff-tailed Bumblebee queen (right) on the pavement, which apart from anything else was in danger of being trodden on. Gently encouraging her onto a fallen leaf I transfer her to a nearby patch of garden crocuses, where it could rest and feed safely.



In an effort to find my first butterflies of the year I head to the chalk grassland slope of nearby Woldingham's Long Hill, a site I have been involved in restoring and maintaining for the past dozen or more years. What was then a small area of open grassland has been more than doubled in size through extensive scrub removal and regular management, partly through sheep grazing and partly through annual brush-cutting and a continuing programme of selective tree and scrub removal.



Above left: The restored chalk grassland slope, one of our rarest environments (with only around 2% remaining).

Above: The view from Long Hill, looking back towards Caterham.

Left: The new bench we installed last year on Long Hill is a perfect place to rest and enjoy the view.

For the first time this year I was not disappointed with the butterflies on show –



Brimstones (mostly males) were out in force, 20, maybe more – it is difficult to be certain as they continually flutter around, chasing each other about in their territorial contests.

A number of Peacocks, brilliantly coloured in the sunshine.

A Comma in the dappled light of the scrubby woodland at the narrower end of the chalk grassland slope.

The restored grassland is still devoid of flowers, apart from a number of Early Dog Violets and Dandelions that are alive with insects.

Over the coming weeks it will increasingly become home to many chalk grassland specialists, which I make a mental note to come back to record. We also do an annual species survey here in the summer to record the progress of the site that will feed into its future management plan.

The path verges are showing a few additional signs of the transition into spring –



Three-cornered Leek – a pretty flower that gets its name from the triangular cross-section of its stem



Honesty (the white variety – also comes in pink)



Field Forget-me-nots



Groundsel



Green Alkanet, much loved by bees



Dandelion alive with insects.

Returning home via the patch of crocuses where I had earlier left the queen bee, I see that she has gone. Hopefully, she recovered enough to continue on her way and will now raise a new colony of her own.

March 11

Lovely to see at least one Goldfinch back at the seed feeder again. I have not seen them for quite a while, so the appearance of this most colourful and cheering of birds is definitely worth of note.

Interestingly, despite all the common food advice, they have continually shown no interest in the niger seeds I put out, instead preferring the sunflower hearts.



March 12

Take the bridleway known as Butterfly Walk from close to the bottom of Bug Hill (you simply have to love the names of the local countryside roads and paths), which climbs quite quickly, giving views across the surrounding countryside in the mild mix of sunshine and fast-moving clouds. Turn along the grass slope with its great views over Halliloo Valley, with its golf course.



Re-join Bug Hill near the top, close to the Victorian iron coal post (dating from 1861) – one of a series dotted around the outskirts of London, placed to denote the point at which tax was liable on certain goods (such as coal and wine) being transported into the capital. These were originally set up following the Great Fire of London in 1666 to help pay for the rebuilding of the city (duties were abolished in 1890).

The narrow path into the corner of Blanchman's Farm Local Nature Reserve (designated as a LNR in 2006), where we worked last month, re-instating the original hedgerow and cutting back the willow slowly invading the open grassland, is far too muddy to use, so I take the wooden walkway further along the road, through the access gate we replaced a few years ago.

The site was a farm until 1945, with records dating back to the 16th Century.

This has been a site of a lot of varied work over my years as a conservation volunteer, apart from the work last month, this has included regular pond (see photo below) maintenance, including vegetation clearance, a dipping platform and flooding measures; scrub clearance; hedge laying; coppicing; gate, sign, fence and bench installation; and grass cutting.



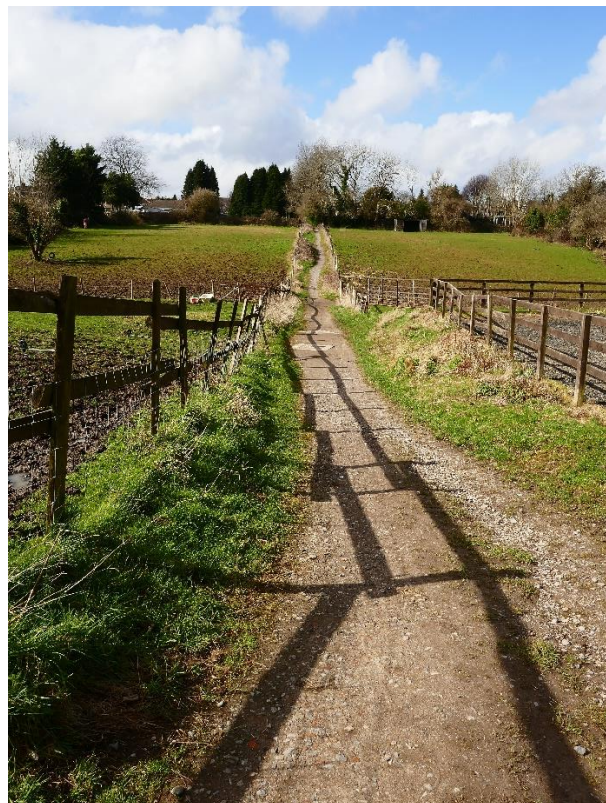
Stop while walking around the pond to stop to capture the reflections of the trees and dipping platform in the still surface.



The piles of arisings from last month's clearance work are still in the field where we left them. Leave the reserve through the entrance on the busy main road through the village and take the road towards Farleigh, reminding me that it will soon be time to catch up on the progress of the trio of Farleigh ponds we worked on clearing at the end of last year.

Turn off along the sloping path up between horse fields (right) to the village recreation ground before turning along Mint Walk, where it is encouraging to see that the first Cow Parsley is in flower. The far end of the track is incredibly muddy where it passes between more well-used horse fields and it is only possible to get by holding the rail in my left hand and my hiking pole (which I am now very grateful I brought along as a last-minute decision) in my right hand. Luckily, no one is trying to come the other way, other one of us will either have to do this in reverse, or get very muddy.

Emerge into Crewes La, another unmade track, the dip of which is heavily rutted with deep tire tracks, filled with muddy water, the sides slippery but just passable by carefully gripping the hawthorn stems growing along the edge of the path.





Crewes La (left) and views to either side (above & below).



Return along the track (Crewes La) to visit the picturesque All Saints church, dating from the mid-13th century. A couple of magnificent yew trees in the grounds are said to be between 700 and 1,000 years old. Sir Joseph Swan, inventor of the electric lightbulb (1879), is said to be buried in this churchyard, but I don't find him. Maybe I'll spend more time next time I'm here.



From the church I return to the triangular village green - where the traffic always seems to be queued along all three sides – with its trees (the oldest dating from the 1890s) and war memorial (dedicated in December 1921).

Pass Willy’s Pit pond (below right), which is already starting to narrow with encroaching vegetation once again following our major clearance work at the end of 2020. A perfect example of why conservation work needs to be a constant programme of work.

Cross the School Common (below) - designated as a common in 1866 and used for many years for grazing sheep - next to the pond, taking the footpath around the allotments to the site of the former smock mill (destroyed by fire in 1865) and back to The Green.



Return through Blanchman’s Farm to the top of Bug Hill, before retracing my steps along Butterfly Walk, enjoying a last elevated view over the surrounding countryside, and back home.



Photowalking

I have discovered that there is a name for what I do when I'm wandering wherever my feet take me and taking pictures of whatever catches my attention – 'Photowalking' – who knew?

Often my routes involve little or no pre-planning – the weather, the season, specifics I want to capture, new places I want to explore, time available, where I'm working and my mood all play a part in where I wander. And many is the time when sudden inspiration has taken me far from where I was originally heading for. Even the position of the sun will play its part, as it may enhance or interfere with the possible pictures I have in my mind.

Walking alone gives me total freedom to stop whenever I want, change direction whenever the fancy takes me or to move on to somewhere completely different if I feel so moved. No matter what my mood when I set out it takes very little time before I am lured into the tranquil beauty of my surroundings.

I find that having a camera for company increases my inclination to explore and also to look for the small things that could otherwise be passed by. I shoot whatever captures my attention or imagination, providing a pictorial record of that particular walk, anything from clouds scudding across the sky, stunning landscapes, reflections in a lake or puddle, brief encounters with wildlife or an inquisitive cow, the tiniest of flowers, lichens, mosses and fungi, frost on a fencepost or a spider's web bejewelled with morning dew.

Whether I've walked two miles or ten, I return home feeling refreshed and keen to review the photos I've taken over a rewarding cup of coffee. And I always look forward to deciding which ones to post to my The Urban Countryman page. Then it's time to check the weather forecast and work schedule and roughly plan my next Photowalk.

The sun is shining, the forecast is good, I have my camera and my boots, now all I need to do is see where my mood and inspiration takes me.

March 13

The morning rain eventually clears by early afternoon, just in time to enable a walk across Manor Park, where one of the more stunning of the early spring finds on the site is the appearance of the lovely pink flowers that will form the female cones on the European Larch that dominates the centre of the main wildflower meadow.



Adding to the awakening is the increasing number of Wood Anemones that have opened to form dense clusters at the bottom of the site, beside the railway line and dotted along the grass beneath the trees beside Burntwood La. Also known as Windflowers after the way they gently nod in even the slightest breeze.

Also an increasing number of ghostly Common Toothwort beneath the avenue of lime trees that forms The Cloister.

Goat Willow catkins are starting to open, with one tree in particular ahead of all the others in its determination to attract the early pollinators.



Meanwhile, in the garden the Forsythia (left) is almost in full stunning yellow blossom, which is at its very best when viewed from beneath against the backdrop of a clear, pale blue spring sky.

Richard Keaton's Field Notes: March 13 1904

An interesting entry following yesterday's walk:

Went for a walk round Warlingham and saw a Hawfinch, a Treecreeper and a pair of Nuthatches.

The Treecreeper worked every fruit tree in an orchard... [unfortunately, he does not state where in Warlingham the orchard is].

March 14

A stunning pink evening sky over the valley – short-lived but oh, so very eye-catching. Luckily, I just happened to look out the window at the right time – five minutes later and I would have only caught the tail-end as the sky turned grey. Red sky at night... Hopefully, this bodes well for tomorrow's weather and the walk I haven't yet decided upon.

March 15

As predicted by yesterday evening's pink sky, the morning is clear and sunny, so I put on my boots and make a last-minute decision to head for Piles Wood & Devilsden Wood, which run along the top of the slope at Coulsdon's Happy Valley up to Farthing Downs.

With the woods still very much cloaked in their winter mantle (if being largely bare can ever be described as being 'cloaked') it is a great time to hunt out specific features to photograph:

- Structures and textures – rotting trees and stumps, ragged torn limbs and trunks of damaged trees from last month's storms, twisted ropes of ivy clambering high into the air, fissured bark.
- Shadows – of branches across bare trunks and of trees across the woodland floor.

- Contrasting colours – the rich green of mosses against the bare brown and grey of the trees, the fresh green of bluebell shoots, wild garlic, dog’s mercury and lords and ladies against the leaf litter.
- The miniature world – especially of mosses and lichens.
- Woodland awakening – wood anemones and lesser celandines.
- Perspectives – taking shots from different angles, other than just full-on, such as looking up from the base of a tree, taking the picture from ground level, placing objects in the foreground or background to add interest and depth. Angles can make all the difference.



In the woods, whatever time of year there is always so much to capture the interest and imagination of anyone interested in photography. And you don’t need an expensive camera to capture it, just the imagination to see it.

Emerging from the woods, along the sunlit grassland slopes are more flowers to capture –



Barren Strawberry and Wild Strawberry – the most obvious differences being the notches in the petals of the barren strawberry (right), as well as the wide spacing of the petals that allow the green sepals to be clearly seen in the gaps.



The first appearance of Ground Ivy – my first shots photobombed by the sudden appearance of a bee that had chosen the exact same flower to dive inside in search of its valuable nectar.



Other flowers include:

- Dandelions and Daises
- Early Dog Violets
- White Dead-nettle
- Field Speedwell
- Primroses

A few butterflies, mostly Brimstones, Peacocks and a Comma, are also enjoying the day's sunshine.

The highlight of the whole walk however is when more than a dozen Goldfinches suddenly explode from the grass on Farthing Downs into a nearby tree. Definitely a WOW! Moment.

March 16

Following sand storms in the Sahara I find my car covered in the orange dust that has been swept up into the air and across Europe. However, the heavy afternoon rain soon takes care of it.

March 17

An early frost gives way to another gloriously sunny, mild early spring day.

What starts out as a short walk around Caterham Viewpoint on the North Downs ends up, on one of my whims, a lot longer (probably a good 8 to 9 miles), including descending the Downs to walk around North Park Quarry at Bletchingly. A lovely walk that I have not done before – a walk that until this particular whim I didn't know existed.



While the quarry (above) is a sandy scar on the landscape, the disruption does seem to have been kept to a minimum and offset by conservation initiatives. The grassland surrounding the quarry is being grazed by a flock of sheep. There is an impressive thick hedgerow around most of the site that will provide vital habitat and winter food for invertebrates, birds and small mammals. A bund and tree planting keep the quarry out of sight for most of the walk. Mature trees add to the variety of the environment. The highlight is the sound of the first skylarks of the spring. Their presence is probably

greatly helped by the lack of public access and disturbance – so many former skylark habitats are struggling through a combination of the increase in dog ownership and overgrazing, which has reduced the sward height to below that required for nesting ground birds. Without delving into the details of the quarry, this does seem to show how wildlife can adapt and benefit.

The last side of the walk around the quarry crosses the ever-busy M25 to meet the track (Roughett's Lane) I used originally to descend the Downs from Caterham Viewpoint to the start of the walk around the quarry. After a short way I pick up the steep path up through the trees back to the Viewpoint. This is definitely a walk I will be doing again through the seasons to see the changing landscape. The only challenge might be in the height of summer, as shelter from the sun seems to be of a premium.

The walk includes a stop at the hollow, chained oak tree. I was told by someone who lived nearby that they remember it being chained when he was a young lad nearly 60 years ago. The thick iron chain, which is now greatly corroded, was placed around the tree to hold the split trunk together, although why the tree was thought worthy of saving remains a mystery. Over the years it has provided the answer to the old question of what happens when an irresistible force (in this case the ever-expanding tree) meets an immovable object (the iron chain) – the irresistible force simply absorbs the object and they become one and the same thing. The only parts of the chain still visible are where it bridges the gaps in the hollow trunk.



Richard Keaton's Field Notes: March 17 1902

I found a Blackbird just commencing to build in a tangled mass of Old Man's Beard in a hedgerow in Gt. Dene [part of Tillingdown, close to Wapses Lodge, beside the route of what is now the A22]. The structure progressed in erratic stages, some days appearing to have a lot done to it and others very little until it was completed about 24th and allowed to dry.

March 18



Another lovely early spring day, the first day this year that is really t-shirt weather.

The March full moon (pictured) is known as the Worm Moon, as it is the time when earthworms start to surface as the land starts to warm up again. Tonight's clear sky gives a perfect view of it against the black.

March 20

Today is the Spring (Vernal) Equinox, regarded by many as the true first day of Spring. This is celebrated as the festival of Ostara or Eostre (which the Christian church renamed Easter), the goddess of spring, whose symbols are the egg and the hare (which is where our Easter eggs and bunnies originate). Because the hare is a secretive animal and was associated with paganism the church replaced it with the 'more acceptable' rabbit, hence why we do not have the Easter Hare (although in some European countries it does exist).

The Christian celebration of Easter is linked to the phases of the moon (Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox – which is why it is never the same date each year), and the moon and the nocturnal hare are closely linked in pre-Christian tradition. Both were once believed to die every morning to be reborn each night and so this time of year is traditionally linked with rebirth and resurrection.

This is the point of perfect balance between night's darkness and day's light, with the endless battle between the two once again turning in favour of the latter. The natural world is coming alive, the sun is gaining in strength and the days are becoming longer and warmer. It is time to rejoice because Spring is here again.

'Photoperiodism' is apparently the name given to a plant's ability to tell that daylight is increasing and that it is therefore time to flower or come into leaf.

In the garden a pair of Great Tits are showing an interest in the new nest box. Fingers crossed.

March 22

Path Clearance in Hawkhirst Wood

A few days ago the early morning temperature was 2C, with a frost. Today, at the same time, it is 13C.

Today sees a return to Hawkhirst Wood, beside Kenley Common, to carry out a spot of path clearance and the brush-cutting of the woodland glade. So, while the brush-cutting and raking is taking care of the existing glade, a couple of us set to work clearing a large ivy-clad tree that had come down in last month's storms across one of the main woodland paths. The thick, complex tangle of ivy makes it a challenge to even get to the branches and trunk, which is a good 8ins in diameter. The tree itself is mostly dead, with bark boring beetle holes along its length.

One by one the branches are removed and stacked down the slope beside the path so they are not obtrusively in the eyeline of any walkers. With the branches removed the trunk is cut back off the path, the removed top section being added to the growing pile of arisings. Then, using one of the stouter branches as a lever, we roll the remainder of the trunk further to the side, well off the path.



Before path clearance

After Path clearance

After that the work is easier, clearing overhanging branches and a few holly trees to open the side of the path up to allow in more light. The wood is quite dark, with masses of ivy, holly and yew blocking out the light, with impenetrable bramble filling in any gaps. As a result there is little in the way of woodland flowers apart from a few clusters of Lesser Celandine at the very edges of the paths.

While we sit around the sunny glade having our lunch a pair of Roe deer come crashing out of the woods. Upon seeing us they come to a sudden stop before quickly taking off in different directions.

March 23

New Glade Creation in Hawkhirst Wood

Another glorious day. It's not often in March that we consider working in the cool woodland shade to be a benefit!

This time we are working in a small woodland clearing beside the main glade that was brush-cut yesterday to open it up to create a glade extension. The clearing is amongst a dense stand of yew, holly and spindly hawthorn, mostly in a very poor condition, and a number of dead ash trees. The

larger, more dangerous ash trees, which make up a large proportion of this woodland, will be removed as part of a planned major ash clearance, leaving us to concentrate on the smaller ones at the centre of what will be the new glade extension. A lot of the ground beneath the dense cover is bare, with very few flowers, except for a few Early Dog Violets adding to the Lesser Celandine.

Hawkhurst Wood is mostly Secondary Woodland – woodland that has naturally grown up in an area that wasn't originally woodland. In this case it has grown to colonise what was once open chalk grassland. There is talk about restoring the chalk grassland. That will be some effort. However, with a lot of dead ash to be cleared by contractors there are likely to be a lot of open glades created, which could be used as a major stepping stone towards this goal.

March 24

New Glade Creation in Hawkhurst Wood (cont.)

Continuing with the creation of the new glade extension that will increase the size of the existing adjacent glade, initially breaking through the last line of scrub to join the glades up. Work continues to increase the size of the new glade, also widening the paths that lead uphill away from the glades. Taking account of the track of the sun across the site we also lift the crown of some of the larger trees at the edge of the new glade to enable even more light to reach the woodland floor.



The difference in just a couple of days is amazing, with light now pouring into what had previously been a very shaded area of scrubby woodland – before (left top), after (left bottom).

It will be interesting to see what flora takes advantage of our work. I must make a note to come back as spring turns to summer to see the difference.

Below: Looking out from the edge of the glade extension across the existing glade.



The ash trees are like the Walking Dead, mostly thin and spindly as they once competed with each other for the light limited by the holly and yew trees, but they are dead now, their canopies broken, stunted, no more than skeletal remains. They are all dead but some don't seem to know it yet – their cut stumps glisten with sap that no longer brings life in this graveyard of trees.

Lovely to see a Robin already hopping around one of the new habitat piles resulting for all the cleared trees and scrub.

March 25

Until 1752 and the introduction of the Gregorian calendar (in 1751) March 25 was considered to be the first day of the new year. A warm day at the start of springs seems like a better time to celebrate the start of another year than the cold, dark depths of winter – it's a time so much more conducive to positive thoughts and hopes for the year ahead.

Another glorious early spring day – a perfect morning for a wander across Manor Park to witness the unrolling of the season. The air is filled with birdsong, robins, blackbirds, blue tits, long-tailed tits, great tits. A buzzard mews as it circles overhead. A great spotted woodpecker cheeps. The sounds of spring having sprung.

Butterflies are flitting around in the sunshine –

- Brimstones
- Small Tortoiseshells (right)
- Peacocks
- Commas



The trees are awakening –

- Horse chestnut leaves emerging from their large sticky buds.
- Goat willow catkins now litter the ground.
- The beautiful pink of the Larch cone flowers.
- Hazel catkins, hanging empty, fluttering in the breeze
- The purple-red of Wych elm flowers (right).



A bee-fly is feeding from a patch of Barren Strawberries.

Bees buzz around busily – Buff-tailed Bumblebees, Red-tailed Bumblebees, Common Carder Bees and Tawny Mining Bees.

Divots in the grass – probably where foxes have dug for worms – like the uncoordinated swings of one of the Edwardian golfers that once played the holes of the former Warlingham Golf Club.

Flowers are emerging in ever-greater numbers, a profusion of white, yellows and violet –

- Primroses – wild and cultivated pink varieties.
- Dense patches of Wood Anemones have thickened since my last visit.
- Blackthorn blossom.
- Cowslips, the first of many hundreds.
- Patch of pale-yellow False Oxlips, a hybrid between primroses and cowslips.

- Masses of Lesser Celandine glowing in the sunshine.
- Dense Dandelion heads attracting bees and butterflies.
- Barren Strawberries.
- Common Toothwort beneath the trees upon which they rely for their sustenance.
- Dog's Mercury carpeting the woodland floor with green.
- Early Dog Violets, mostly along the path edge along the avenue of limes.
- The first Cow Parsley.
- White Dead-nettle.

There is one noticeable absence - the patches of Coltsfoot I discovered here last year.

However, a trip into the town centre provides a cluster of these plants on a patch of grassland opposite St John's church.

An unusual plant in that the flowers appear before the leaves, which don't emerge until the flowers have gone.



March 27

A sudden change in the weather sees a misty start to the first day of British Summer Time. If the clocks going back at the end of October is my least favourite day of the year, the sudden extension of the evening light has to rank as one of my favourites, although I fail to see why in this modern era the clocks have to change at all. They should just stay at BST so we can have longer evenings all year round.

The morning is greeted by a trio of raucous Starlings in the Forsythia at the suet feeder.

A clear night, thousands of stars, even in our light-polluted modern world.
A Tawny Owl hoots from somewhere in the trees up on Tillingdown.

March 28

Making the most of the forecast last day of exceptional spring weather for a walk from Caterham Viewpoint (on the North Downs), via the North Downs Way, Winders Hill and Tillingdown, back into Caterham.

There are a stunning number of Bluebells in flower so early this year – an indication of the exceptionally warm, sunny weather we have enjoyed. I wonder what will happen to all these plants if the forecast sleet and snow hits the area in a few days. March is supposed to come in like a lion and go out like a lamb – looks like this year will be the other way around.

Dense patches of Ground Ivy have suddenly come to the fore in the warm sunshine. Also known as Ale Hoof this plant was used to clarify and flavour beer before the introduction of hops in the 16th Century.

Regardless of the wintry forecast, Caterham Viewpoint is already snowy with masses of Daisies. Other flowers encountered along today's walk –

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Red Campion• Lesser Celandine appears everywhere• Primroses are at their best• Wood Anemones• Dandelions• Wood Spurge• Wavy Bittercress• Goldilocks Buttercup• Field Forget-me-nots• Field Speedwell• Wild Strawberry• Barren Strawberry | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Red Dead-nettle• White Dead-nettle• Common Vetch• Early Dog Violets• Sweet Violets• Herb Robert• Scentless Mayweed• Groundsel• Green Alkanet• Periwinkle• Stinking Helleborine |
|---|--|

Hartstongue Ferns and the glossy spear-like leaves of Lords and Ladies add to the rich green carpet of Bluebells, Wild Garlic and Dog's Mercury.

Peacocks, Brimstones and Commas flit along open grassland and the sunlit path verges and grassy banks. Buff-tailed Bumblebees and Red-tailed Bumblebees buzz close to the ground, checking holes and crevices for possible nesting sites. They too will need to find shelter ahead of the forecast cold snap.

The woods are filled with birdsong, as the males stake out territories and compete for mates. The joyous sound of Skylarks on the last leg of the walk along the ridge at Tillingdown.

March 29

Gate Replacement – Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area (SWCA)

The first task of the day is to replace the rotten slamming post for the field gate leading from Tithe Pit Shaw onto the SWCA to enable the adjacent kissing gate to be reinstalled.

The gate cage can then be rebuilt to prevent motorbike users from illegally getting onto the site.

The first job is to dig out the old central post that acts as both the slamming post for the field gate and the hanging post for the kissing gate. And for the first couple of inches the digging is easy... then we hit the concrete! Luckily, we have the breaker and generator on board the trailer, but even then it takes a couple of hours to dig it out! Concrete around a post always seems like a good idea, but it's downside is that it traps water against the wood, causing it to rot quicker than normal. For this reason we have only ever used concrete when dealing with metal posts that we know won't need removing for a very long time.

With the new post installed (and not concreted in!) we attach the kissing gate to determine where the slamming posts for it need to be positioned. These enable us to work out the dimensions of the

wooden cage, which requires a 3rd post to complete the corners of the eventual box to which the rails will be added tomorrow.



March 30

Gate Replacement – Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area (cont.)

The immediate realisation is that the last gate post we installed at the end of yesterday is in the wrong place to complete a square frame around the kissing gate, so the first task of the day is to dig it out again – not the first time we have ever had to dig out a post we've put in. Then, using a couple of the rails from which we will build the sides of the cage, positioned against the 2 slamming posts, we recalculate the position of the last post. Having done this we all agree that this would potentially make the cage too small, especially for anyone trying to get through with a rucksack, so we make the space slightly more generous. This positions the removed post right back where we had just removed it from! If having to dig out a post we've just installed is not a new experience, putting it back in the position we have just removed it from certainly is!

With all the posts in place (and agreed that they will not be moved) we attach the rails – 3 rails on 2 sides of the box, leaving the other 2 sides for the gate to open and close into for access. With the in/out/in post in place the box is no longer square so a bit of chiselling is required for the rails to fit flush against the posts.



The last task is to cut and sand the posts to ensure they are all the same height – it is the small parts of any task that make all the difference.

March 31

This time last week it was close to 20C. Today, with the windchill, it's barely above freezing!

A heavy late morning hail storm leaves the gutters looking as if they are full of crushed polystyrene.

Meanwhile, blizzards have been reported on the North Downs in Kent!!

**Welcome to spring!**

A new word for sleet – Graupel.