

Urban Countryman Monthly Field Notes

April 2022

April is here and spring continues to gather pace, with woodland flowers appearing in great profusion as they need to flower and set seed before the canopy closes over for another year. Of all the monthly changes, April will see what will probably be the most dramatic. Carpets of bluebells will form one of nature's greatest wildflower displays, while cherry, apple, pear, damson and blackthorn blossom will add fragrance and beauty to orchards and hedgerows alike. Butterflies will be increasingly on the wing, taking advantage of warming sunshine, and bees and myriad insects will exploit the longer hours of sunshine. Meanwhile, the fields and meadows will be echoing with the bleating of newborn lambs. This is a burgeoning month, full of promise.

However, beware of April's deception and false promise (fitting for a month that starts with Fool's Day), as the month is well known for 'April showers' and its ability to suddenly revert to the bitter cold of winter, with frost and snow still a possibility. Last year winter didn't seem to want to end and, despite the long hours of sunshine (it was the 2nd sunniest April on record, with the UK as a whole seeing nearly 50% more sunshine than average), April had the lowest average minimum temperature since 1922, while the daily maximum temperatures were also below average. The month also saw the highest level of air frosts in 60 years, more typical for December, January or February. Strangely, given the month's reputation, it was also one of the driest Aprils on record. There is a saying: Never trust on April sunshine.

With the coming of April there is a significant change in the countryside work schedule. The bird nesting season has now officially started, so most woodland work is at an end. Instead, we turn our attention to small scrub clearance in the meadows; footpath maintenance; fence, step, bench and sign post construction and maintenance; and the start of the butterfly and wildflower monitoring season.

*Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!*
Robert Browning (1812-89)

April 1

After March ended with hail, sleet and bitter winds, I awake to snow being blown horizontally along the valley. Thankfully, it is short-lived and doesn't settle. However, there is still a bite to the wind and the brief appearance of the sun brings little warmth.

A pair of highly frustrated grey squirrels in the garden trying to break in to one of the caged bird feeders, their attacks getting more and more frenzied as they fail to bite through the wire. If animals have the concept of pure anger, these squirrels are definitely angry!

April 2

A hard frost on the cars starts the day, the wind has a definite chill, although not the bite of yesterday, and a number of attempts to snow again are half-hearted, as though winter knows it is beaten.

Today's walk takes in local Old Park Wood, Caterham Viewpoint (on the North Downs), part of the North Downs Way, a section of the Woldingham Countryside Walk, Woldingham school and Wapses Lodge.

Masses of Ivy-leaf Toadflax (which always make me think of tiny purple rabbits) growing from stone walls (right).

Clusters of Primroses, Cowslips and False Oxlips (below right) – a natural hybrid of primroses and cowslips.

The first Bugle in flower on the North Downs.

A surprising number of flowering Bluebells – far more than I would expect this early in the month. Great display of Daisies, a flower made all the more lovely by the pink tips on the underside of the snowy-white petals (below).



Also on display are large numbers of Wood Anemone, Lesser Celandine, Ground Ivy, Wild Strawberry and Barren Strawberry (see last month's Field Notes for how to tell the difference), White Dead-nettle, Red Dead-nettle, Field Speedwell, Dandelion, Wavy Bittercress, Early Dog Violet and Groundsel.

April 3

For scythers everywhere today is International Peening Day (the means by which a scythe blade is sharpened using a hammer and small anvil) – who'd have thought!

Another cold, frosty morning beneath a blue sky, a lovely day for a wander around the ponds at nearby Godstone, where the surfaces are still enough to capture some reflection shots, including a few in black & white to add to the atmosphere (and even giving a 3-D effect).



Along the verge by the wetland area on the edge of the village is a nice display of Butterbur (left), which gets its name from the fact that the large leaves were once used to wrapper butter. Also along the edge of the wetland area are the first Yellow Archangel (above) of the year.

Close by is a patch of Bush Vetch (above).

The wetland area is home to clusters of deep-yellow Marsh Marigolds (also known as Kingcups). However, the ground is far too boggy to even attempt reaching them for a decent photo. The first steps onto what looks like firm ground causes me to quickly reassess just how much I want to get a photo of them. I decide there will hopefully be better opportunities in the coming weeks.

April 5

After a relatively easy morning of removing plastic guards from the trees that were planted a couple of years ago in Banstead Woods, I take a wander around the woods to see how the woodland spring is progressing.

Amongst the increasing number of Wood Anemones, Primroses, Lesser Celandines, Ground Ivy, Early Dog Violets, Dog's Mercury, Barren and Wild Strawberries, Dandelions, Hairy Bittercress and Wavy Bittercress, my favourite find was a couple of clusters of Wood Sorrel (below), with their delicately scribbled white flowers and distinctive leaves.



The Bluebells are starting to flower, although far fewer here than I have seen so far in the sunnier, south facing woods on my local patch of the North Downs. One of the sad sights is that the paths that were trampled through the bluebells last spring are still bare and easily visible where thousands of plants were crushed just so that people could take photos to capture a few social media 'likes'! The crushed leaves result in the plants being unable to store energy from the sunlight in their bulbs to enable them to flower in subsequent years - it is estimated that it can take up to 7 years for a crushed bluebell to recover.

Spot the first Garlic Mustard (right) in flower this year (also commonly known as Jack-by-the-Hedge after its love of growing at the base of hedgerows). This is an important larval food plant for the Orange Tip butterfly.



April 6

A day of April showers.

Newly emerged local flowers to add to the growing spring list –

- Shepherd's Purse.
- Smooth Sowthistle.
- Round-leaved Cranesbill (right).



April 7

Construct a Bee Nesting Bank at The Knoll, Chipstead Downs

Today we are creating our first ever bee bank - at the far end of The Knoll (the site of the former Dene Farm nuttery/orchard) on Chipstead Downs. With the core created (a number of large logs covered with a layer of earth) we are completing the bank (or berm as some people prefer) with a layer of sand, which has been delivered by the time we arrive – 4 x 1-tonne bags of it, deposited over the fence at the back of the car park. Now all we have to do is wheelbarrow it nearly 200m uphill to the bank/berm site! Thankfully, there are 5 wheelbarrows and enough volunteers to have one team of loaders at the bottom, a second team of bank constructors at the top and a third team of sand shifters (including myself) on the wheelbarrows. Shifting the sand takes a good a couple of hours, during which I probably wasn't the only one wishing the loaded journey was the other way - downhill. Each load is dumped next to the bank for the constructors to pile on top and compact down. By the time all the sand has been moved it has formed a layer (on the top and sunny side) to a depth of 18ins. The completed bank is approx. 6ft wide at the base, 3ft high and 15ft long.



Constructed core



Another wheelbarrow



Completed bank/berm

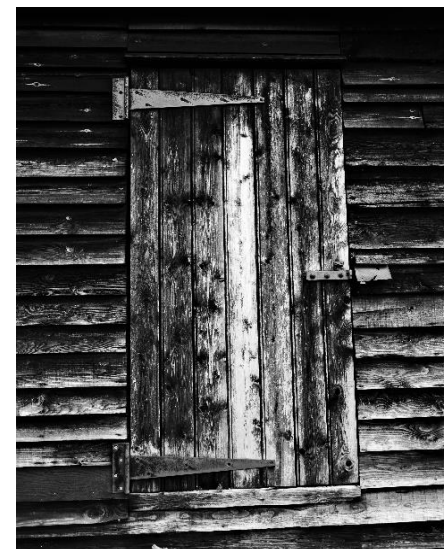
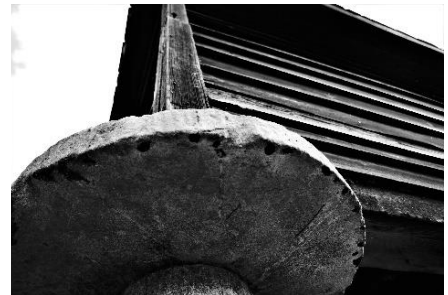
The bank will need to be completed with fencing and a sign to try to ensure that it's not used as a play area or dog toilet – what are the chances?

Once rain, when we eventually get some, has firmed up and stabilised the surface initial holes can be bored into the sand to provide an incentive for the bees to start exploring its possibilities. This will also, hopefully, give us a better opportunity to record some of the many species of bee that we know have started to inhabit and visit the site since our restoration work has turned it from a scrubby

monoculture into a species-rich wildflower meadow (a couple of years ago I recorded over 70 wildflower species through spring and summer).

Talking of wildflowers, the site is currently carpeted in masses of purple Ground Ivy, thickest along the lower area we have most recently cleared over the past 2-3 years. There is also plenty of Lesser Celandine and Cowslips.

With the lovely afternoon weather, I wind down from all the wheelbarrowing by taking a few pictures of the nearby old grain store, complete with the traditional staddle stones that kept the floor off the damp ground and prevented rats from getting into the store.



Also stop off on the way home at Chipstead's Elmore Pond to capture a few reflection shots following the major vegetation clearance work we were involved in at the end of last year.

Beside the pond is the first sighting this year of a cluster of Dovesfoot Cranesbill (below).



April 8

Thousands of Cowslips starting to emerge all across Manor Park. Swathes of Wood Anemone and Lesser Celandine amongst the trees.

April 9

A lovely clear, sunny morning, the frost having quickly melted to leave a slight chill, but a perfect day for a walk in the local woods.

The swathes of devastation caused by the spread of ash-dieback is offset by the emergence of new life, as the progress of spring continues the awakening of the unaffected woodland.

Bluebells appear in greater numbers, with large areas of the woodland floor covered in the dense green carpet of their shoots, filled with the promise of the display that will very soon be upon us.

Dog's Mercury, singularly unspectacular, is nevertheless stunning when its masses ranks are dappled by sunlight and crossed by the long shadows of the woodland trees (below).



Small patches of Wild Garlic shoots are all that will appear this year – the densest area now lies crushed beneath the wheels of heavy machinery and the skeletal remains of fallen ash trees.

Swathes of Wood Anemones, glowing snowy-white in the sunlight, nod gently in the breeze.

Lesser Celandines, glow like spilled gold, although many are now on the wane.

Violets are everywhere adding their subtle colour to the ever-expanding pallet.

Tightly curled prehistoric-looking ferns (right) are starting to unfurl.



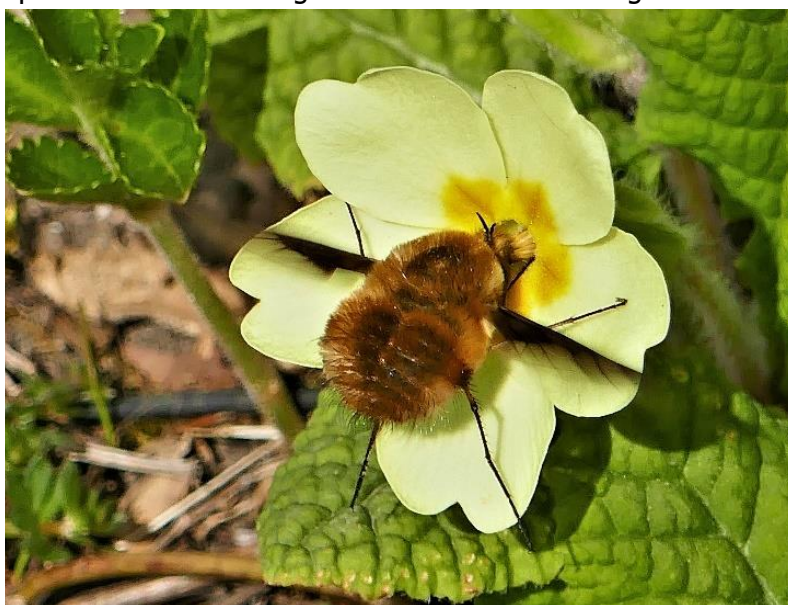
The alien flowerheads of Wood Spurge on the thick red stems.
 Dense clusters of large glossy, spear-shaped leaves of Lords and Ladies reflect the sunlight.
 The dark green of patches of Garlic Mustard and Common Ragwort.
 Along the edge of the woods, dense patches of purple Ground Ivy, visited by myriad bees.
 The brilliant white blossom of Blackthorn.
 Glossy red berries of Holly catch the eye that cares to wander from the ground.
 A lone white Bluebell really catches the attention amongst the mass of lush green.
 The air is filled with birdsong – that of the Blackbird, crystal clear, cutting across all the others, probably our most underrated songbird.
 The drumming of a Great Spotted Woodpecker.
 Great Tits, Bluetits, Robins, Wrens, all add to the woodland soundtrack as they defend territories and attract mates.
 Leaves bursting free from their buds, fresh green, papery, almost translucent – Hazel (below left), Hawthorn (below middle), Sycamore, Horse Chestnut (below right).



A pair of startled Roe deer suddenly explode from the undergrowth and take off through the trees.

Bee Flies (right) are out in force, using their long proboscis to reach into the primrose flowers. These are one of nature's great mimics – harmless insects that get protection by pretending to be something far more dangerous.

Everywhere is life as the woodland awakens and fills the world with hope.



April 11

A pair of Starlings in the garden collecting dried vegetation, while a pair of Goldfinches are busy collecting moss from the shed roof. Meanwhile, after initial interest the Great Tits appear to have rejected the new deluxe nest box for somewhere more suitable. Clearly, they don't share the designer's claims of it being perfect for their needs.

The lovely Cuckooflowers (also known as Lady's Smock and Milkmaids) are out along the bridleway through Rydon's Wood on Coulsdon Common. If there is one flower that tells me that spring is truly here it is Cuckooflower.



Coulsdon Common (another part of the newly designated South London Downs National Nature Reserve), with its open grassland, woodland, lone trees and woodland pond looks lovely in the spring sunshine.





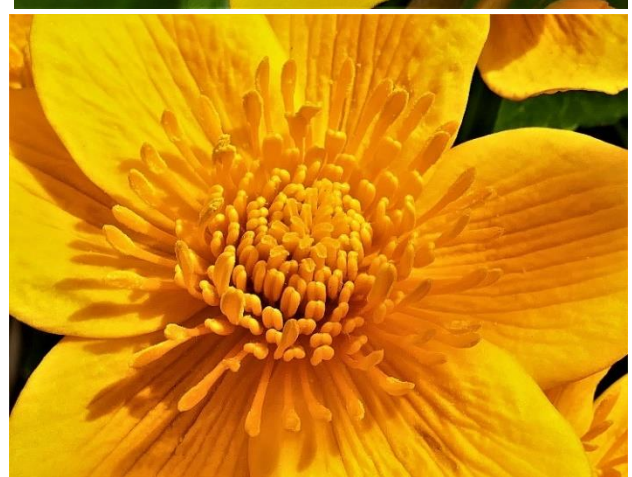
As does the adjacent Kenley airfield, now home to gliders, but once a front-line fighter station during the Battle of Britain. With its runways, apron, blast pens, rifle range and officers' mess the airfield is said to be the most intact of the surviving Battle of Britain airfields.



April 12

To the woman who sarcastically commented, 'I thought we were supposed to be planting trees,' as we were clearing dead ash trees from the edge of a popular footpath on the edge of Banstead Woods, I can only say that we wish we didn't have to, but we take public safety seriously. However, from her reluctance to stop I guess she wasn't interested in understanding what we were doing, only in giving us the benefit of her 'informed' displeasure.

There is a lovely cluster of deep yellow Marsh Marigolds beside the bank at the shallow end of The Lagoon in the corner of Chipstead Downs and, unlike the recent ones at Godstone, these I have no problems getting close to. As well as myself they are also proving attractive to male and female Brimstone butterflies.



Along the re-sown wildflower area above The Lagoon there are plenty of spring flowers emerging - Daisies, Red Dead-nettle and White Dead-nettle, Ground Ivy, Green Alkanet, Dandelions, Groundsel, Forget-me-nots, Wood Spurge, Field Speedwell.

April 13

Spot my first Holly Blue of the year in the sunshine on Caterham Viewpoint.

Richard Kearton Field Notes – April 13 1902

Saw a male Wheatear on Gt Dene. [Gt Dene was sited around what is now the route of the A22 close to Wapses Lodge] Birds seen and heard in one short ramble –

1 Carrion Crow, 2 Rook, 3 Ring Dove, 4 Robin, 5 Wren, 6 Hedge Sparrow [now recognised as a Dunnock and not a species of sparrow], 7 Sparrow, 8 Pheasant, 9 French Partridge, 10 Eng Partridge, 11 Jay, 12 Missel Thrush, 13 Song Thrush, 14 Blackbird, 15 Gt Tit, 16 Long-tailed Tit, 17 Blue Tit, 18 Marsh Tit, 19 Willow Wren [Willow Warbler], 20 Wheatear, 21 Bullfinch, 22 Chaffinch, 23 Greenfinch, 24 Linnet, 25 Pied Wagtail, 26 Tree Pipit, 27 Peewit.

April 14

Scything Nettles at The Knoll

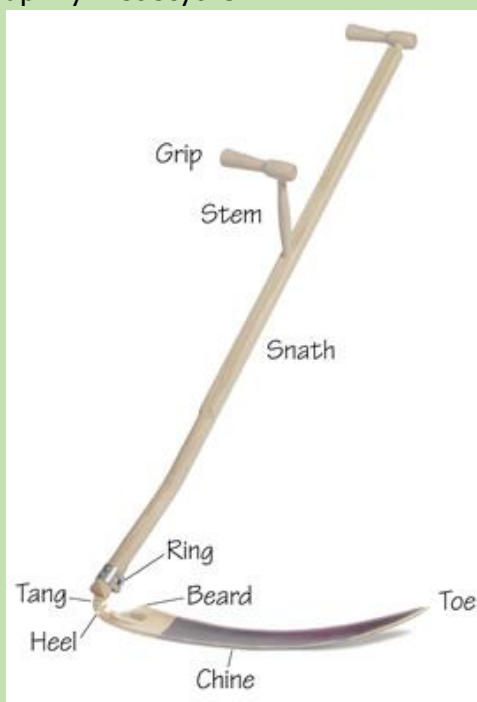
The early mist quickly gives way to a warm, sunny day, a perfect day for the first day of scything this year. And if there is one thing I have grown to love since I first gave it a try a couple of years ago it's scything. It didn't take me long to acquire one of my own, using rapidly gained experience to find a blade that suited the type of rough vegetation we mostly deal with on the downland.

One Man Went to Mow... or How I Fell in Love With Scything

I was a big fan of using a brush-cutter – that is until I picked up my first scythe.

A scythe consists of a curved steel blade attached to a long wooden shaft (snath). Adjustable handles allow the user to hold the scythe and stand upright while swinging the blade horizontally at ground level to cut grass or brush. Blades come in a variety of lengths, with longer blades for grass cutting and shorter blades for tougher, woodier vegetation. Scythes share 2 important qualities with many tools that date back to pre-mechanised times: they are simple and cheap to make and maintain, and are good at what they do. Because a lot of our scything involves clearing brambles, bracken and rough vegetation we have gone for a mid-range 65cm 'ditching' blade. However, I have recently supplemented this with a shorter 55cm 'bramble' blade. Both are excellent for the job and will easily remove young saplings as well.

The scythe appears to have developed during Roman times and has been used in most areas of the world for centuries to mow grass for making hay, harvesting corn or for general vegetation clearance.



There are basically two styles of scythes, the heavier Anglo-American and the European (commonly known as the 'Austrian' because Austria has excelled in its manufacture), which is lighter and easier to use. Indeed, the first thing you notice when picking up an Austrian scythe is how amazingly light and well-balanced it is.

Using the body as the pivotal point the aim is to pull the scythe in an arc across the front of your body. Once you get a rhythm going it quickly becomes second nature, with the repetitive action and the fall of the vegetation almost mesmerising, especially when accompanied by the swish of the cutting blade. You stop from time to time, take the whetstone from the holder on your belt, flick a few strokes along the length of the blade to resharpen it and then it's back to work again.

Advantages of a scythe over a mechanical brush-cutter:

- No noise from a roaring engine, destroying the tranquillity of the countryside for hour after hour.
- No pollution from engine exhaust – more environmentally friendly – no use of fossil fuels.
- No working next to a hot engine on a hot day.
- No need for PPE – especially in the summer heat.
- No danger of a speeding blade hitting hidden objects – stones/flint, glass, dog waste – and sending them flying dangerously through the air, with the prospect of injury.
- Less stressful and lighter to use – with far less strain on the body.
- No problems caused by exposure to extended vibration.
- Cheaper to buy, maintain and run (and no prospect of running out of fuel).
- Quicker to maintain in the field – less that can go wrong.
- Less mulching of the vegetation makes it easier to rake, which leads to less nutrients leaching into the soil (encouraging more aggressive vegetation to swamp more delicate wildflowers).
- Toxic sap (e.g. from wild parsnip) not thrown into the air, making it safer to use for cutting these plants.
- Easier to transport and carry and less effort to put down and pick up to deal with other tasks.
- Easier to work right up to fences, trees, saplings without fear of causing damage.
- No need for specialist training or qualifications to use.
- Much more fun to use.

The work is good for both mind and body. The physical exercise is obvious. The mental relaxation comes when the user gets into an almost hypnotic rhythm of cutting, watching the vegetation dropping into a 'windrow', drawing the blade back along the ground to reset, taking a half step forward, and repeating – all the while accompanied by birdsong and other natural sounds that a brush-cutter or mower would drown out.

The lower half of The Knoll is a mass of young nettles (mostly only a few inches high), so the idea is to greatly reduce them while they are just emerging to prevent them from taking over the site to the detriment of all the other plants that have come back since we started our major scrub clearance and restoration programme.



Scythe blade.



First patch of nettles scythed

While scything I come across a small patch of Moschatel (also known as Townhall Clock after its almost square flowerhead, comprising 4 outer faces and a top face). The bright green flowers really stand out against the darker green of the nettle leaves and one of the great advantages of scything over mechanical cutting, especially unencumbered by a visor, is that it gives you a greater opportunity to spot and avoid plants that you would rather save. This is especially true of low-lying plants, such as the masses of Ground Ivy, as the angled blade makes it easier to skim over the top of them.



Today's scything also gives an opportunity to thin out the Common Ragwort rosettes that are dotted across the site. These won't flower and seed until their second year (the rosettes forming only in the first year), so now is a great time to keep on top of them, although the aim is not to eradicate this highly valuable nectar source. This native wildflower is a source of nectar for around 120 different invertebrate species (more than any other wildflower), 30 of which depend upon it exclusively. To eradicate it would therefore have a major environmental impact, including the loss of many species, that in turn will impact nature's complex web of inter-relationships (more of which I will explore in the summer).

Clusters of Cowslips, recorded on the previous recent visit, are emerging in greater number.

April 15

All along the narrow, enclosed track (Green La) that forms the boundary between the parishes of Chaldon and Caterham Hill, eventually leading into Coulsdon's Happy Valley, the hedgerows are bursting into spring green.

Along the base of the hedgerows the first deep blue of Germander Speedwell has joined the paler blue of its cousin Field Speedwell and the white of Greater Stitchwort.

Shades of yellow are provided by Dandelions, Primroses, Cowslips and glossy Lesser Celandine.

This seems to be a good year for Ground Ivy, as the purple flowers are everywhere, with the deeper shade of Sweet Violets appearing in dense clusters.

The taller standing Honesty creates eye-catching splashes of colour, mostly purple, but also a small amount of the white variety.

Green Alkanet and a spray of Bluebells add further deep blue to the speedwells, contrasting with the pale blue of Forget-me-nots, while Lungwort adds its combination of pink and blue flowers to the gathering.

Above the flowers, the hedgerow Blackthorn sprinkles the countryside with white blossom, joined by the white of Garlic Mustard, Daisies, the first Cow Parsley and White Dead-nettle.

Red Dead-nettle adds its pink to the palette of spring colour.

All around are the signs of spring breaking its shackles and exploding into colourful life.



Forget-me-nots



Greater Stitchwort



Honesty



White Dead-nettle



Germander Speedwell



Lungwort

April 16

Spot my first Orange Tip butterfly (male) of the year as it flutters across the garden on its way to somewhere more important or interesting.

A pair of Goldfinches in the front garden. One flits back and forth from a bush to the car window, unable to realise that its rival is its own reflection. The pair then perch on an overhead telephone wire before flying off.

As the Forsythia blossom drops to the ground so the Lilac blossom starts to open, signs that spring is passing from its infancy into middle-age.

The April full moon is called the Pink Moon after the main colour of the flowers that proliferated at this time of year.



Richard Kearton Field Notes – April 16 1910

Caught two Adders, male and female, both together on Rifle range [the valley at Tillingdown was formerly the site of a 1,000 yd rifle range].

April 17 - Easter Sunday

The temperature is pushing 20C, almost unheard of for an Easter weekend!

If you've ever wondered why the date of Easter is never the same each year, it is because it is linked to the phases of the moon - Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the first full moon (Apr 16) after the Spring Equinox (Mar 20). The latest possible date for Easter therefore occurs when the Spring Equinox fall immediately after a full moon, leaving close to a month before the next one. Meanwhile, the earliest possible date would be if a full moon occurred on a Saturday on the day after the Spring Equinox (which would have Easter Sunday on or around March 22).

The Christian celebration of Easter is taken from the pagan festival of Ostara or Eostre, the goddess of spring (celebrated at the Spring Equinox). The symbols associated with Ostara (Eostre) are the egg and hare, both seen as signs of rebirth (because they are such secretive animals hares were once thought to die each morning and be reborn each night, along with the moon). The church continued the theme of rebirth, associating Easter with the resurrection. However, because of its pagan links, the Christian church replaced the hare with the 'more acceptable' rabbit, hence the reason why we do not have the Easter Hare. And so the Easter Bunny was born.

A lovely afternoon walking across the sunny (and surprisingly quiet) Headley Heath, where stunning yellow gorse is everywhere – as the old saying goes: When gorse is out of flower, kissing will be out of fashion.





Most noticeable is how dry the ground is. And still you get ignorant people having a barbeque on the dry grassland. I can only guess what they will do with the horrid disposable barbeque (with its charcoal from non-sustainable overseas sources, soaked in chemicals) when they have finished.

April 18

It has been reported that the first House Martins have completed their annual migration from sub-Saharan Africa and returned to the nesting sites above the Nat West building in Caterham town centre.

April 19

Continue with the ash clearance beside the track along the edge of Banstead Woods. Interestingly the ash trees seem to be restricted to a narrow belt beside the track and have not ventured any deeper into the wood itself. The biggest challenge is that it is almost impossible to drop any of them without them getting hung up in a neighbouring tree or one across the other side of the track, necessitating each one being wrested to the ground by one means or another – a good stout lever comes in very handy.

Richard Kearton Field Notes – April 19 1925

Nests in garden and orchard – [This would have been while he was living at 'Ashdene' 169 Croydon Rd in Caterham Valley. The house is long gone, replaced by the current Kearton Place estate]

Blackbirds, with 3 young

Songthrush with eggs

Hedge Sparrow [Dunnock] with eggs

Robin with 2 eggs. Blue Tit nesting in old stump in orchard same as last year.

Heard Cuckoos and saw a Swallow first time today.

April 20

A lovely warm day on the North Downs, the highlight of which is sitting at the top of 'the bowl' at Park Ham watching a distant vixen and her two cubs through my binoculars, which meant that I could get a really good view from approx. 300m away without disturbing them, although I'm certain that mum knew exactly where I was all the time. However, they continued to act totally naturally, feeding and playing and following mum, but never venturing too far from the bramble thicket where they hid while mum hunted.



'The Bowl' at Park Ham on the North Downs

The verges and hedgerows have exploded with green and the wildflowers continue to emerge in ever-greater numbers.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater Stitchwort• Garlic Mustard (living up to its name of Jack-by-the-Hedge)• Dandelions• Bush Vetch• White Dead-nettle and Red Dead-nettle• Yellow Archangel• Honesty (pink) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cow Parsley• The first Wild Garlic flowers• In the woods the Bluebells are close to their best, with Wood Anemones and Lesser Celandine in abundance in the sunniest areas• Hart's Tongue Ferns unfurling |
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As the chalk grassland reaches the start of its season, the mostly delicate flowers are worth taking the time to explore in detail –

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clusters of blue Bugle• Germander Speedwell and Common Field Speedwell• Dense patches of Crosswort (below left), with their clusters of tiny green crosses | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bulbous Buttercup• The first clusters of tiny, low-growing Chalk Milkwort (below right), once believed to increase milk production in both cattle and nursing mothers. |
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Masses of Cowslips (right) forming amazingly dense carpets in the meadow at the base of 'the bowl'.

Tight, fragrant plates of Wayfaring Tree blossom on the open hillside.

The views from the top of the Downs are spectacular, looking away to the south over the Sussex Weald (below left and right).



April 21

Scything Nettles at The Knoll (cont)

The early mist has given way to another warm, sunny morning, another perfect day for continuing with scything the nettles at The Knoll (Chipstead Downs).

With each passing day it appears that more flowers are emerging –

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground Ivy everywhere • Crosswort • White Dead-nettle • Bluebells • Moschatel • Dandelions • Cowslips • Lesser Celandine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lords and Ladies • Germander Speedwell • Forget-me-nots • Dog's Mercury • Wild Strawberry • Sweet Violets • Bugle • Wavy Bittercress |
|---|---|

There are butterflies flitting around in the sunshine – Peacocks, Small Tortoiseshells and Brimstones. Also plenty of bees – some of which will hopefully be attracted to the new bee bank/berm, which has now been fenced and signed in order to protect it – fingers crossed on both counts.

While exploring the wildflowers I disturb a young Common Lizard that was sunning itself beneath one of the fruit trees – the blossom a stunning white and pink and attracting numerous bees and flying insects (below) – just another example of the life that has been brought to The Knoll since we started our clearance and restoration programme.



At the end of work I take the opportunity to explore nearby Chiphouse Wood (along Chipstead Valley), where the Bluebells are fully out and looking stunning in the afternoon sunshine. Their subtle scent is carried on the gentle breeze. Surely, there is no greater wildflower display than a woodland misted in bluebells.





A Mist of Bluebells

The spectacular display of bluebells, this most quintessentially English of plants and indicator of ancient woodland, is one of nature's most breath-taking spectacles, one that no-one, given the opportunity, should miss out on. Did we not have bluebell woods it is the sort of display that we would travel across the world to see. It is therefore fortunate that Britain is said to be home to more than half of the world's common bluebell population - *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*.

The plants beside the path are individually discernible, with their delicate bell flowers hanging from one side of the stalk, causing the distinctive curve, as though suggesting humility – the invading Spanish bluebell, which sadly is crossing with our native plant, is discernible by its erect stalk, caused by the flowers being more evenly distributed. Indeed, a recent Plantlife survey recorded 1 in 6 woodland bluebells to be either of the Spanish variety or a hybrid – pollinators being no respecter of origin.

As I look up it becomes harder to identify individual plants, until it is impossible for the eye to separate one from another and it is just a gently shifting mass of sun-drenched blue, becoming a misty blue haze, something more experienced than seen, for the eye and brain cannot cope with the sensory overload. The blue continues beneath the trees, washing against the trunks and fallen logs until it is lost from view. The fragrance, carried on the gentle breeze, is heady and at the same time as delicate as the flower itself – another differentiating feature is the Spanish bluebells have no scent. Unfortunately, the display will be all too brief, but it is all the more magnificent for its fleeting appearance.

Bluebells feature quite prominently in English folklore and it is believed that to step on these delicate flowers growing beneath an oak tree is to risk the wrath of the woodland fairies, whose revenge will be to cause the perpetrator to become enchanted and die soon after. It was also believed that the bells rang out to summon fairies to gatherings and that any human hearing the bell ring would also die. In some parts of the country it is thought unlucky to take bluebells into the house, although, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is actually illegal to pick them. Even in the language of flowers the bluebell stands for sorrowful regret, although on a cheerier note it also stands for constancy.

On a more practical level, the sap was once used to provide the glue in bookbinding and fletchers once used it to glue feathers onto the shafts of arrows. In Elizabethan times the starch contained in the plant was used to stiffen the ruffs worn around the necks of fashionable ladies and gentlemen.

Beside the main track at the bottom of Chiphouse Wood, nearest the railway line, the Blackthorn is stunning in its snowy-white blossom.



Amongst the trees, surrounded by the deep blue of the bluebells is the white of Wood Anemones and Greater Stitchwort, and the deep glistening yellow of Lesser Celandine.

Although the dry and mostly sunny weather is most welcome, especially on work days, the cracks in the woodland paths highlight how much we desperately need spring rain. Without it the summer stresses on the trees will be greatly increased, which will probably be most felt when the first of the autumn storms arrive. I think the idea of April being associated with showers might need a rethink if this trend of dry Aprils continues.

April 22

In flower on Manor Park as we enter the middle passage of astronomical spring –

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Red Clover• Primrose• Dandelion• Cow Parsley• Meadow Buttercup• Goldilocks Buttercup• Bulbous Buttercup• Field Forget-me-not• Lesser Celandine• Wood Anemone• Bluebell• Garlic Mustard• Green Alkanet | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wild Garlic• Bush Vetch• Common Vetch• Common Sorrel• Cowslip• Ground Ivy• White Dead-nettle• Cuckooflower• Ribwort Plantain• Greater Plantain• Dog's Mercury• Daisy• Germander Speedwell |
|---|---|

- Barren Strawberry
 - Bugle
 - Greater Stitchwort
 - Common Toothwort
 - Grape Hyacinth
 - Lords and Ladies
- Green Field Speedwell
 - Wood Speedwell
 - Honesty (white)
 - Early Dog Violet
 - Sweet Violet
 - Groundsel

Sadly, the downside to more people discovering and enjoying their great local green space is the amount of rubbish they choose to leave behind, especially around the car park, despite the bin being empty!! Littering seems to be a very British disease.

The cherry tree (below) outside St Mary's church on Caterham Hill (where wildlife photographers Richard and Cherry Kearton are buried) is particularly stunning in the sunshine.



April 23 - St George's Day

I wonder how many people know that St George is not the original patron saint of England. That honour falls to the St Edmund (or Edmund the Martyr), Anglo-Saxon King of East Anglia in the 9th century.

St Edmund – Original Patron Saint of England – and St George

According to legend, Edmund was captured in battle by the Vikings who tried to get him to renounce his Christian faith. When he refused, he was bound to a tree, shot through with arrows and beheaded. His decapitated head is said to have been reunited with its body with the help of a talking wolf who protected the head and alerted Edmund's followers.

Talking wolves aside, we know that his remains were moved to what is today Bury St. Edmunds, where a religious community was founded to care for his shrine, which then became a place of national pilgrimage. Such was the influence of St Edmund that on St Edmund's Day (20 November) 1214 rebel English barons held a secret meeting there before confronting King John with the Charter of Liberties, the forerunner to Magna Carta which he signed a year later. This event is reflected in the motto of Bury St Edmunds: 'Shrine of a King, Cradle of the Law'.

St Edmund's influence began to fade when, during the Third Crusade in 1199, King Richard I visited the tomb of St. George in Lydda on the eve of battle. The next day he won a great victory, following which Richard adopted St. George as his personal patron and protector of the army. In 1348, Edward III founded a new order of chivalry, the Knights of the Garter and made St George the patron of the Order and also declared him Patron Saint of England.

Attempts were made in 2006 and 2013 to have St Edmund reinstated as patron saint of England (on the basis that St George, patron saint of 16 other countries, had never even visited England) but were rejected by the government.

Having been moved to France, today St Edmund's remains are kept in the chapel in Arundel Castle.

At long last get around to putting up bee nest boxes in the garden to attract any solitary bees that may be around. Two are shop-bought and made of a collection of different sizes of bamboo, while the other is a block of wood into which I drilled a series of holes. I wonder which, if any, the bees will be attracted to. All are sited on trellis in full sun, south-facing and around 4ft off the ground.

Meanwhile, many of the bees in the garden are attracted to the deep blue flowers of the clusters of Green Alkanet – a plant that can spread and become quite invasive, but I'm keen to keep as much as possible for the bees.

Richard Kearton Field Notes – April 25 1917

Hear Wryneck at the bottom of orchard, Saw a Barn Swallow [Swallow] in the evening.

April 26

Bench Replacement on the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area (SWCA)

A nice spring day – how many times have I said that so far this spring? – for working out in the open, replacing a pair of rotting benches in fields called Ibetts Piece and 20 Acres – the second being quite self-explanatory, but who or what Ibetts was and what the field was a Piece of remains a mystery.

Compared to some of the flinty fields that comprise the SWCA (another of the green spaces forming part of the newly designated South London Downs National Nature Reserve) the digging in these fields is relatively easy. Ibetts Piece is quite sandy and friable after all the dry weather. It's getting out the old bench that proves more challenging, as whoever installed it had attached wooden blocks either side of each leg at the bottom, meaning that the bench refuses to be removed until fully dug out. Thanks to whoever did that, much appreciated... NOT! However, having done all the digging to remove it we couldn't benefit from our efforts as the new solid oak bench isn't going in exactly the same position, but a few feet further forward to give a better view of the field. 20 Acres proves a little more challenging to dig as it is more stony ground, with some rather large flints – 1 was the size of my boot and takes a considerable amount of shifting.



Each bench comes in pre-built sections – a seat and 2 legs, all solid and cut from oak and with the relevant field name routed into the front of the seat – which is extremely helpful as I can never remember the names of which field I'm in. Once bolted together the bench is dropped into the newly dug holes, where the levels are checked (and if necessary adjusted) and then firmly tamped in place. The bench is completed by crafting a set of dowels (from an old broom handle) to fill the holes where

the bolts that attach the seat to the legs are recessed. The end result is solid, functional and a nice addition to the paths that cross the fields. So, if you come across one of these benches and decide to sit and enjoy the view, spare a thought for those of us who put them there.

April 27

Bench Replacement on the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area (Cont.)

The temperature is well down on yesterday, so definitely a day for working and not hanging around, with a second bench to add to 20 Acre field, with a further 2 benches on Long Acres Field. We have given up with digging the old benches out and instead take to employing a few hefty swings of the sledgehammer to the rotten legs. The legs break off below ground level, meaning that it's an easy job to cover over the stumps.

The day is filled with birdsong –

Multiple Skylarks suddenly lifting up to fill the air with their liquid, burbling song.

Meadow Pipits taking off from the long grass in a looping flight across the meadow.

Chiff-chaffs calling from the trees throughout the day without stopping at any point.

Add in the songs and calls of Bluetits, Great Tits, Long-tailed Tits, Blackbirds and Robins and it is more than easy to ignore the duller, chillier conditions.

April 28

Bench Replacement on the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area (Cont.)

Another day, another set of benches – the first going in on Dipsley Field, beneath an oak tree that stands beside the small seasonal pond, which in complete contrast to the rest of the countryside is far from dry. Of all the benches this is the easiest one to dig, the soil is dry and stone-free. And while we are digging we are treated to the sound of a nearby Linnet.



A second bench goes in on Ibbets Pieice, where we started, and another one goes in on Skylark Field to make 8 in total.

Richard Kearton Field Notes – April 28 1919

About 12 inches of snow. Song Thrush forsaken; young ones dead and nest half full of snow. I cleaned it out and between 9 and 10 am female Song Thrush came back and covered young, shuffling them into the warmest position under her body. After about an hour she gave up the task and flew away.

April 29

From the explosion of feathers in the garden it looks like another fat, lumbering wood pigeon didn't make it. These birds are a bit slow to learn.

Make the most of the bright start to the day to explore the local woods around Caterham Viewpoint on the North Downs, especially to capture the display of Bluebells, which is at its stunning best right now. I could easily take hundreds of photos and it takes a degree of discipline to limit that number to just 40 or so, especially as the light coming through the rapidly closing canopy makes for some wonderful highlights and contrasts.







Other woodland flowers on show, although paling against the mass of fragrant bluebells –

- Lesser Celandine and Early Dog Violet – both now noticeably on the wane.
- Yellow Archangel
- Cow Parsley
- Garlic Mustard
- Sweet Woodruff just starting to come into flower
- Fringe Cups also just starting to come into flower
- Wood Anemones
- Primroses
- Hairy Bittercress
- Wild Garlic at various stages – some in flower, some still in bud and some still just in leaf.
- Dandelion flowers and clocks
- Dog's Mercury
- Herb Robert
- Red Campion
- Wood Sorrel
- Ground Ivy
- Wood Speedwell just starting to emerge, with some open but most still with tightly closed flowers.

In the garden the Welsh Poppies, a favourite of the bumblebees, are opening their papery yellow and orange flowers.

The fantastic Lilac blossom is nearly at its best.

Red Valerian is just starting to flower. A highlight of this plant last year was the unexpected sight of a Hummingbird Hawk Moth hovering while drinking from the flowers. I so hope to see this again this year.

Richard Kearton Field Notes – April 29 1923

Saw first Swallow in Caterham.

April 30 - Beltane

The last day of what has been another exceptionally dry April, with only about a third of the average rainfall, following a very similar April last year. And there is certainly no prospect of any rain today.

Beltane

The festival of Beltane (meaning bright or goodly fire) begins at sunset today and runs until sunset tomorrow. It celebrates the halfway point between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, which to our ancestors represented the start of the rural summer.

Historically, it marked the time when cattle were driven out to the summer pastures. Rituals were performed to protect the cattle, crops and people, and to encourage growth. Special bonfires, honouring the sun, were lit and their flames, smoke and ashes were deemed to have protective powers. The people and their cattle would walk around the bonfire or between two bonfires and sometimes even leap over the flames or embers. All household fires would be doused and then re-lit from the Beltane bonfire and doorways and windows (and even the cattle) would be decorated with yellow May flowers (possibly because they evoked images of fire).

It was also a time to honour the 2 great mystical ancient spirits and protectors of the wild Greenwood, the Green Man, consort of the Goddess, and Herne the Hunter, protector of the animal kingdom, with his stag-like antlers. How we could do with their protection today. At this time the Romans also celebrated the festival of Flora, the goddess of flowers and spring.

Traditions include crowning the May Queen, who then leads the procession around the village as a symbol of the young Goddess. The Maypole is also associated with the festival, where a pole (traditionally birch) is inserted into the earth and a garland of flowers placed around the top representing the male potency and female fertility of spring, with the many coloured ribbons and the ensuing weaving dance symbolising the spiral of life. Baskets of flowers were also left on neighbours' doorsteps – what a great tradition to revive.