

Urban Countryman

Monthly Field Notes

June 2022

June is the month of abundance. It is the month that sees wildflower meadows in full bloom, although these are worryingly in major decline – over the past 50 years a combination of industrial farming methods, modern land management (or mis-management), development and neglect has seen a loss of 97% of our wildflower meadows, which in turn has had a detrimental impact upon our insects, birds and small mammals.

It is the start of the fruit season, with the first strawberries appearing on allotments and in our shops. Meanwhile, on the local North Downs wild strawberries provide a harvest of tiny taste-bombs.

Although some spring butterflies are on the wane, their numbers are more than made up for by the appearance of the summer species. Moths are also abundant on warm nights, and dragonflies and damselflies glitter over water. And, with the increase in moths, so increases the chance of seeing some of our fabulous aerial night hunters – bats. Many birds are winding down the breeding season and June is a great opportunity to see the young fledglings as their parents bring them to our garden feeders – a real treat for anyone with the time and patience. As a result, birdsong starts to drop from mid-month.

In the woods the canopy has filled in, extinguishing much of the dappled light that patterned many paths through spring and providing refuge from summer heat.

June also brings us the Summer Solstice – the longest day – and the strongest sun of the year. In the northern islands it is a time when the sun barely sets before it begins to rise again. However, 'Flaming June' is often less of a heat wave, more of a damp squib, with the longest day arriving before summer has had an opportunity to get going – some years it appears as if it never will. 2018 was the exception as June saw the start of one of the longest heatwaves in memory, with early harvests and hay cuts, and farmers having to contemplate breaking into their winter feed as grasslands became brown and parched by the end of the month.

June is the month of hunting wildflowers, as the annual wildflower surveys begin, and evening walks.

June 1

Standing in Caterham Valley town centre watching the nesting House Martins swooping and circling from their permanent nests below the roof line above the Nat West building. There aren't as many in previous years, which hopefully isn't a trend, as summer in the town centre would not be the same without them.

Late spring flowers are continuing to emerge, with the eye-catching colours of lemony-yellow Mouse-ear Hawkweed (right, top) and Orange Hawkweed (right, centre), more commonly known as Fox and Cubs.

The less eye-catching Shepherd's Purse (below, left) gets its name from its seedpods (below, centre), which were said to resemble the bags in which shepherds carried their lunch - made from the dried leather scrotums of rams (each to their own!) - a case of the story behind the name being far more interesting than the unassuming flower itself.

The first dense frothing of Hedge Bedstraw (below, right) has also appeared. This fragrant plant gets its name once having been used to stuff mattresses or strewn upon straw bedding. It was also occasionally used to colour and flavour cheese.



June 2

The juvenile Starlings (right) continue to be regular visitors to the bird feeders, although now mostly unaccompanied by the adult birds. There are up to 4 young visitors, although they only occasionally appear all at the same time. They can be differentiated from the adult birds by their mostly grey plumage - they will not take on their adult plumage until their first moult towards the end of summer.

Interesting watching the adult Great Tit approach the nest box on the side of the shed. It hops from branch to twig to stem, each time getting closer and stopping for a few seconds to check the way is safe before disappearing into the box.

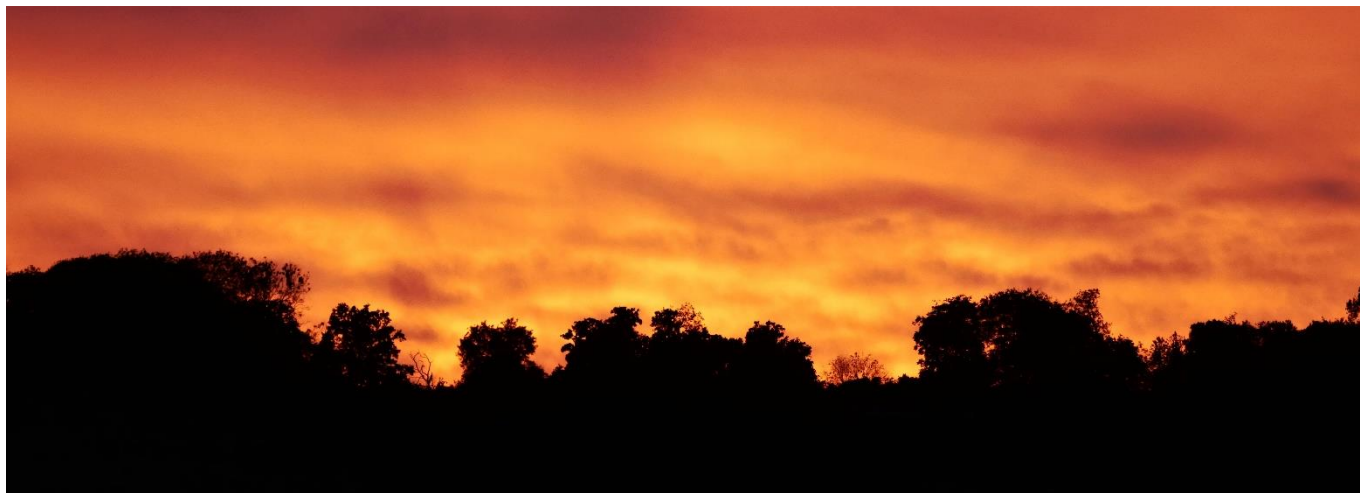
Each approach involves stopping on the same branch or stem. So interesting to watch.



Standing on Westway Common at the top of the hill in the afternoon watching a quartet of Swifts flying in line.

June 4

The pair of adult Great Tits are still flying in and out of the nest box, although it is noticeable how long it is taking them to return. I wonder if this is down to the dearth of insects and caterpillars, which won't be helped by the sudden change to more unsettled weather. Even during the warm, sunny spring there were surprisingly few butterflies, bees and insects about. Is this the 'canary in the coalmine' warning us of how bad things are? Latest research does not paint a good picture of insect populations, with many in decline.



Stunning evening sky over the valley, warning of the forecast approaching stormy weather.

Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 4 1907

Went to Oxted and photo'd a Nightingale on her nest at Mrs Patterson's. Very deep nest in a hedge between grass field and Limpsfield Common. Bird soon grew bold and confident, and allowed me to photo her any number of times on her nest.

[I wonder when Nightingales were last seen or heard in nearby Oxted.]

June 5 – World Environment Day

A misty, murky day, more like an autumn day than end of spring/early summer. If we were desperate for rain just a short while ago, we are certainly getting it now.

June has started in complete contrast to the May we have just waved goodbye to – the 5th warmest May and UK Spring on record (with the highest daily average minimum temperatures for May on record, mainly due to the mild nights).

June 6

Scything Bracken in the New Glade in Banstead Woods

The summer work schedule gets under way today with my favourite task: scything. Today sees us return to the woodland glade we created in Banstead Woods last August to remove the dense covering of bracken that has followed in the wake of this spring's impressive bluebell display.

Back in August 2021 this area was an impenetrable mass of mostly bracken and bramble, well over head high in many places. It took us a few days of scything and raking to clear it. As a result of this clearance, it was a dense carpet of bluebells in the spring – thousands upon thousands of plants had been suppressed beneath the over-shading vegetation that had prevented light and warmth from reaching the woodland floor. With the vegetation removed the dormant bulbs were able to take full advantage of our work.

With the bluebells now gone over, it is time to attack the bracken that has emerged again. By tackling it at this time of year we will prevent the spores from spreading. Meanwhile, experience from scything other parts of the woods, especially under the elms beside the orchard (also to encourage the dormant bluebells) has demonstrated how regular annual scything progressively depletes the ability of the bracken and rough vegetation to regenerate. As a consequence, what took us 4-5 days last year takes only 1 day this year. Having a team of 4 scythers, rakers and forkers makes short work of the bracken – see photos right.



*Above: glade before
Below: glade after*

Despite the carpet of bluebells now existing of limp, yellowing leaves, there were a few plants surprisingly still in flower – the first time I have seen flowering bluebells in these woods this late in the year.



We also had time to start expanding the glade into an adjacent area where there are also signs of plentiful bluebells. Unfortunately, the rain set in before we could get it raked off, so that will have to wait for another day.



If you've ever been close to a Stinkhorn fungus (left) you will know exactly how it came by its name.

Close to the end of the day's scything I find a pair at the edge of where I'm busy extending the glade. I can smell them before I see them – in a Covid world, they are definitely one way to test whether you have lost your sense of smell!

Unfortunately, both have lost their slimy grey-green spore cap covering, but retain their impressively pungent aroma. It is this aroma of rotting flesh that attracts the flies the fungus relies upon to disperse its spores.

June 8

A nice sunny afternoon for conducting an unofficial wildflower survey along the restored chalk grassland slope (right) below Caterham Viewpoint on the North Downs, recording the different species currently in flower.



The most eye-catching of the flowers is the good display of Common Spotted Orchids (left and below) that appear in a variety of shades of pink and ghostly white.



Horseshoe Vetch



Fairy Flax



Rock Rose



Goat's Beard



Yellow Wort



Deadly Nightshade



Agrimony



Milkwort (also appears in blue)



Wild Strawberry

- Bird's-foot Trefoil
- Greater Yellow Rattle (now in great swathes across the site).
- Ox-eye Daisy
- Lesser hawkbit
- Rough Hawkbit
- Mouse-ear Hawkeed (see pic – June 1)
- Salad Burnet
- Common Twayblade
- Hawkweed Ox-tongue
- Bugle (mostly gone over)
- Hedge Bedstraw
- Red Clover & White Clover
- Wild Marjoram
- Black Medick
- St John's Wort
- Herb Bennet
- Meadow Buttercup
- Wood Spurge
- Field Forget-me-not
- Cleavers
- Common Nettle
- Dog's Mercury
- Germander Speedwell
- Ribwort Plantain
- Daisy

Common Blue butterflies (below) flitting around, with males competing with each other.



Also managed to capture a couple of lovely daytime moths.



Treble-bar moth



Clay Triple Lines moth

Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 8 1913

Went out on Rifle range [the valley at Tillingdown, which was formally a 1,000yd rifle range] in morning. Very wet. Saw weasel and poaching cat. In evening got moving pictures of Meadow Pipit feeding young – under exposed.

June 9

Scything in Banstead Woods

Another day of scything in the woods, starting with the cutting back of encroaching brambles and nettles from the edges of the main track up from Park Farm. Not only will this make the track more accessible for walkers, it is also important that it is kept clear to allow access to the woods for emergency vehicles.



Track before



Track after

With the track completed we move onto the area under the hybrid elms (close to the woodland orchards) which, 4 years ago, was the very first site we started using scythes to cut. At that time the incredibly dense bracken was over head high, with nothing else growing beneath. That very first cut (June 2018) had a dramatic effect – the following spring the floor, which had previously been devoid of life, was an amazing carpet of bluebells (right).



With each year's scything – done once the bluebells have gone over – the bracken has weakened, coming back lower and more thinly spread.

When we arrive today, it is barely above shin high – with very few up to waste high. It is also more sparsely spread. From the vast numbers of spent bluebells, this year has seen another brilliant display. 3 scythes soon make short work of the vegetation. My scythe, with its shorter (50cm) blade, is perfect for cutting through thicker-stemmed vegetation, such as bracken, ferns, nettles, willowherb, all of which fall with ease as the blade slices through them, the slight upward tilt of the cutting edge adding to the efficiency of the cut. It's amazing how little effort is required so long as the cutting edge is kept sharp.



*Right Top: Beneath the Elms – Before Scything
Right Bottom: Beneath the Elms – After Scything*

What is most noticeable is the sudden appearance of many more woodland wildflowers – Yellow Pimpernel (below left), Bugle, Ground Ivy, Red Campion, Forget-me-not, Figwort (below right), Broad-leaved Willowherb and Herb Bennet. All have taken advantage of the removal of the out-competing bracken.



Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 11 1918

Went down to Golf Links [in Richard Kearton's time nearby Manor Park was the 9-hole Warlingham Golf Club] and exposed 6 plates on Nuthatch entering and leaving nest hole.

Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 13 1907

Got a series of still and moving pictures of Willow Wren [Willow Warbler] feeding her chicks on Rifle range. Cock would not face the camera, but hen did so quite readily and soon became very tame.

June 14

Extend Glade in Banstead Woods

Return to the new glade we cut in Banstead Woods at the end of last summer to continue the extension we started last week.

The area we have targeted is very similar to what we dealt with initially – the bracken is dense and head high (below), there are plenty of thick trailing brambles and quite a few fallen branches buried deep within the vegetation. This makes the scything a lot tougher than the regrowth we tackled last week, but keeping the blade sharp is key to effective clearance. By the end of the session we have doubled the size of this part of the glade.



The glade extension: After



From the mass of bluebell stalks that carpet the entire area of the extended glade this should be a fantastic display next spring – I must ensure that I come back here to capture it.

On a warm, sunny afternoon it is nice to walk through the cool shade of the woods once the scythe is packed away. There are now fewer flowers around, mostly restricted to where the light can still get in through the closed canopy – open glades (such as the one we have created) and the edges of woodland rides. Amongst the flowers are Herb Bennet, Red Campion, Yellow Pimpernel, Broad-leaved Willowherb, Germander Speedwell, Wood Speedwell, Buttercup, Enchanter's Nightshade (my favourite woodland flower name) and Bramble.



Enchanter's Nightshade



Herb Bennet

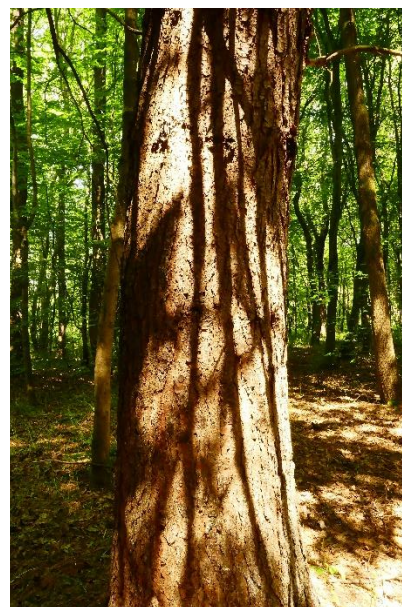
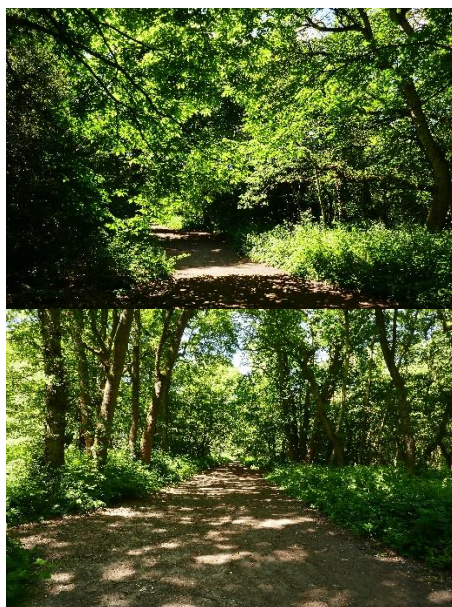


Yellow Pimpernel



Red Campion

The canopy has closed over and has replaced its fresh spring green leaves with the harsher green of summer, as the leaves toughen up to defend themselves against insect attack. Beneath the trees, the shade has reached its height, replacing the sunlit paths of a few weeks ago - it is clear to see why the flowers appear during the early spring. There is something eerily magical in the woods, as though my progress beneath the dense leaf canopy is being made under the watchful gaze of ancient trees, the silent guardians of the wood. The peace is somehow exaggerated by the constant buzz of insects. On a warm day, like today, even though the air may be still, the temperature within the wood, thanks to the shade, is a good few degrees lower than the surrounding downland. Conversely, on a cold winter's night the temperature within the wood is a shade warmer as the trees hang onto whatever heat the daytime has provided.



Banstead Wood covers just over 200 acres and is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). There are records of the woodland existing in the Domesday Book of 1087. In the 13th and 14th centuries royalty created a park where deer could be hunted, with a lodge where royalty and nobility could be entertained.

The 1756 map of Surrey shows woodland roughly similar in size and shape to that of today. In the Victorian era it was generally neglected and management became secondary to its role as a shooting estate.

To the right of the stony footpath is the area of hazel we coppiced in the winter of 2019/20. The progress of the regrowth is exceptional, with new stems having reached a good 10ft and more.

Old stands of Hazel, with their aged coppice stools, speak of a time, stretching back to the Middle Ages, when the woodland would have been alive with industry and the sound of axe, saw and lathe. In Celtic folklore hazel was known as the tree of knowledge and was thought to have many magical properties. On a more practical note, the tough, straight hazel poles are commonly used for bean poles and pea sticks, and fencing and hurdle-making. Cut and split, hazel poles would have been used by thatchers, twisted and bent in half and pushed into thatch to keep it in place – the average thatched house would require about 5,000 of these spars. As far back as Tudor times, until the introduction of wire fencing, hazel would have been used to create moveable hurdle-fencing, in great demand when sheep and wool were the mainstay of the country's wealth and foreign trade. Hazel was also used for cotton reels and salmon traps and bundles of rods were also used as ship's fenders for the wood is tough enough to withstand the stress of pressure between ship and wharf. Similar bundles were used by engineers for providing drainage beneath roads and revetment work. The brushwood was also bundled into faggots that were used for the firing of bread ovens.

Further along is a stand of architecturally inspiring mature Oaks, centuries of wisdom locked within their craggy bark, rich in mythology and bound into our history and sense of national identity.

Oak trees were vital to building the ships upon which the nation depended for trade and defence. To build a new warship took approximately 2,000 mature oaks, equivalent to 50 acres of trees – and during Elizabeth I's reign nearly 30,000 mature oaks, each taking approx a century to produce, were felled. From the 1850s, however, the introduction of iron for shipbuilding and the availability of oak from America brought about the end of demand for English oak timber and with it a decline in ancient woodland management.

With the highest tannin content, oak bark was an important factor in the leather industry and in the 18th and 19th centuries great tracts of oak wood were given over to bark production, and it is believed that there probably would have been a tannery in the area. Oak is also a key constituent of many of the country's historic buildings, ranging from manor houses and great barns to castles and cathedrals and was commonly used to make barrels and casks.

Oaks now provide a richly important habitat and food source for wildlife: birds and squirrels build nests in the crown; some 280 different insects such as wasps, moths, aphids, spiders, gall mites and beetles feed upon the leaves; ivy, lichen, mosses and fungi invade the branches and bark; and birds, insects and mammals feed on the acorns.

From the Middle Ages until the 18th century, until the Enclosure Acts denied access, commoners drove their pigs into oak woodland on common land to feed upon the abundant acorns. Even the roots of young oak are sought by insects such as weevils. There is also a very close, symbiotic relationship between tree and wildlife such as Jays and squirrels, which bury far more acorns than they will ever rediscover, thereby aiding the spread of oak trees across the countryside.

In the 17th and 18th centuries charcoal was much in demand by the iron and glass industries and for the manufacture of gunpowder. Trees would be felled by axe and two-man saws, snedded (the side branches cut away by axe), barked (whereby the bark of trees such as oak with a value for tanning would be carefully harvested), measured and marked (for easy identification and ownership) and hauled, or 'tushed', by a chain or rope pulled by horse or tractor to be loaded onto a timber wagon or hauled to a saw-pit where the timber would be firstly hewed (where the round sides are removed by a broad axe designed to cut along the length of the log rather than into it), after which it would be moved to the saw-pit to be cut into the required sizes. Now our timber comes by ship from far-off anonymous woods, often from unsustainable sources, and our woods are silent.

And when they die, like all other trees, they still provide food and protection, with the animals, insects, plants, fungi and mosses that depend upon dead wood playing an important role in the woodland ecosystem. Dead and dying trees therefore play a key role in the lifecycle of ancient woodland. Holes in standing trees provide homes and nest sites for bats, owls, woodpeckers and nuthatches, whilst dead wood harbours a rich population of insects and fungi. As rotting fallen timber breaks down – a process that, for large trees, can take many decades to complete - valuable nutrients are returned to the soil where they are recycled into the next generation of trees.

At this time of year most of the woodland birds are feeding their young and the insects and caterpillars provide an abundance of food.

Nearby, a Yew stands as another symbol of Britain's history.

Subject of myth and superstition, yew trees are familiar as the guardian of churchyards and associated with the longbow, although most of the wood for making longbows was imported from Spain, Italy and Scandinavia (English Yew being too twisted and brittle).

Symbolising both death and immortality, being poisonous but long-lived, and able to re-root their branches to produce fresh saplings, Yew foliage was often laid in coffins and graves at funerals. It was also believed to provide protection against witches, as a witch would be unable to pass by a Yew tree without first counting all the needle-like leaves, a task which, no doubt, would persuade most not to bother.

A line of tall Beech trees - often found on chalk because they need well-drained soil and the shallow roots allow them to survive on thin soils - with their smooth silver-grey trunks like the soaring columns of a cathedral, stand to attention, their great limbs spread to form a gigantic crown. Too regimented to have been an accident of nature, they possibly guard an ancient boundary. There is a simplicity and elegance about them and a sort of class. These are the woodland snobs, refusing to share their space, their dense shade and copious leaf litter ensuring that little can grow beneath them and that no other tree can compete.

Beech trees used to be pollarded (cut above the browsing height of mammals) on a 20-year cycle, the soft springy wood being an advantage in furniture making and was used by bodgers (men who would inhabit and work in the woods) to make chair legs, while cabinet makers used beech more than any other timber. Its ability to bend made it highly prized for making bentwood chairs, where one piece of wood is curved round to form both the rear legs and back from clean-grained, knot-free timber. Coachbuilders also used beech for bodywork. Beechwood, however, has little natural durability and was

rarely used out of doors or in any form of building construction. At one time beech woods, like oak woods, played an important part in village life and economy because pigs could survive the winter eating the seeds or beechmast and acorns, so providing fresh meat all year round.

Yet another beech shows the scars of a lightning strike: a deep vertical fissure splitting its trunk where the water in the vessels beneath the bark had been vaporised. However, even this wound offers the opportunity of life, as it may become home to a colony of bats – all species of British bat are known to frequent woodland.

Although largely unseen, this is a time when woodland mammals are particularly active. The roe deer hides her fawn amongst the dense vegetation, venturing out at dusk to browse upon the fresh new growth. Also venturing out as the light fades will be foxes, badgers, rabbits, bats, voles and mice scurrying busily amongst the leaf litter.

The path taking me deeper and higher into the woods narrows and, with the increased shade, it is noticeable how there is a near absence of flowers and here, ferns, brambles, bracken and nettles dominate.

The attractive white and pale pink flowers of the aggressively thorny Dog Rose, a native shrub without which few woods would be complete, beg us to think better of it. Its fruit (rosehips) are high in vitamin C and have been eaten to thousands of years. Traditionally they have been taken to combat colds and flu.

A giant Sweet Chestnut, with its distinctive grooved and twisted bark, whose durable wood is still used for fence paling, is another example of the art of coppicing, each of its five stems, rising from the floor, now big enough to form a substantial tree in their own right, its combined canopy casting a dense shade over a large area.

There is also Hornbeam, whose tough, durable wood was once used for wheelhubs, mill wheels, industrial cogs and pulleys, and the hammers of piano-keys; Cherry, whose hard reddish wood is popular for carving and turnery; and the flaking silvery-white bark of Silver Birch, a popular firewood. The slender Birch branches end in a fountain-like mass of drooping twigs and cascading delicate leaves. Few trees can match its grace and beauty, and it is often referred to as the Lady of the Woods. There is also Rowan, the tree most often accredited with protective magical powers against the effects of witchcraft, and Spindle, with its angular green twigs, that is known for the quality of its artists' charcoal.

Flat white plates of lace-like Elder flowers shine cheerfully in the gloom against a deeply grooved and furrowed bark and fill the air with their aroma of cut grass and sweetened lemon juice.

In times past summer was regarded as the period between the elder buds first opening and the appearance of the ripe purple berries. Referred to as the 'medicine chest of the people' the elder has long been valued for its supposed medicinal properties, combating such complaints as catarrh, colds, swellings, wounds, bruises and rheumatic pain, and elderflower water is said to aid the complexion. It is also a tree that should be treated with respect and reverence, as it is under the protection of the Elder Mother, and to cut it without first asking permission is to bring bad luck upon oneself. There is an old tradition that states that you should doff your hat to any elder trees you encounter on your walks and politely bid them good day. It was never used for making infant cradles, as the sleeping child would be carried away by the Elder Mother. However, a cross made from elder wood and fastened over the

door of a cowshed or stable was said to ward off evil spirits. Under an Elder was also believed to be the best place to meet fairies on Midsummer Eve.

A sleepy Sycamore, possibly disturbed by my presence, seems to awaken itself from a fitful slumber. It yawns and stretches its limbs towards the sky. Despite being regarded as an invasive nuisance, its pale soft wood is highly valued for kitchenware, as it does not taint food and for this reason it was traditionally used to make milk-pails.

I leave the enclosed path, beyond which stands a coppiced hazel of at least 100 stems, to head uphill across an open field before entering the newer plantation (Harholt Wood was planted around the mid-1990s) of mostly young oak with cherry, willow and silver birch, before re-entering the older woodland and heading downhill, back towards the car park.

It is amazing just how much there is to see and learn – the story of everyday common people who worked and made a living from these woods, captured for centuries by the silent trees and land, a story that we can all learn if only we know what we are looking at; made all the more interesting by the fact that these woods are where we toil in the wake of those unknown people who went before us. The diversity of form, colour, texture, fragrance and purpose is staggering and ever-changing with the turn of the seasons.

Tonight's June full moon is known as the Strawberry Moon and refers to the harvesting of this fruit during the month.

Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 14 1921

Went out to North Park Farm [Godstone]. Lots of Cuckoos about. Found Yellowhammer's nest with chicks. Lesser Whitethroat's nest with one egg, and Great Tit's with young in Woodpecker's nesting home. Saw a Grass Snake and very clumsily missed him. Garden Warblers, Tree Pipits *etc.* about in considerable numbers. Saw a pair of Butcher Birds but could not find their nest.

June 15

Nearby Manor Park is like so many sites I have visited over the past few weeks, where one of the most disturbing signs of things not being well in the environment is the dearth of butterflies so far this year. On many of the sites I have worked on throughout the spring one of the most noticeable things has been the drop in butterfly numbers (even on warm, sunny days) compared with previous years. Hopefully, numbers will pick up, otherwise this could be the watershed year that warns us that something is really wrong. The big question is whether we continue to ignore it.

What doesn't help is the obsession with local authorities for mowing verges and wildflower meadows at the earliest opportunity, depriving butterflies (and myriad invertebrates) of nectar, egg-laying sites and larval foodsources.

Sadly, when the contractors go onto Manor Park to cut it for hay, all butterflies, bees, moths, beetles, hoverflies, flies, bugs, etc will be immediately deprived of everything they need to thrive! Luckily, last year I was able to negotiate a slight delay in mowing from the start of July to the end of July, but this is still far too early for the wildlife that inhabit the site. Fingers crossed that the weather (as happened last year) will further prevent the annual cut until later. If it rains at the end of July, I won't be totally disappointed.

Luckily, today on Manor Park the Meadow Browns are out in force for the first time to boost overall butterfly numbers.

- Meadow Browns - 75

- Common Blues - 7
- Small Tortoiseshell - 2
- Large White - 2
- Speckled Wood - 2

Total 88 butterflies across just 5 species.

Also 7 day-flying Burnet Moths.

Meanwhile, ahead of any cut, Manor Park is looking splendid as the wildflowers evolve from their spring into their summer display –



- Bee Orchid (above)
- Common Spotted Orchid
- Cinquefoil
- Red Clover and White Clover – both in huge numbers across the whole site
- Bulbous Buttercup
- Meadow Buttercup
- Silverweed
- Self Heal(below)



- Hedge Bedstraw
- Wild Rose

- Pyramidal Orchid (above) – masses of which are just starting to open
- Dandelion
- Green Alkanet
- Common Sorrel
- Ox-eye Daisy
- Daisy
- Bird's-foot Trefoil
- Greater Yellow Rattle
- Common Nettle
- Ribwort Plantain
- Greater Plantain
- Cow Parsley – in its final days
- Garlic Mustard – also in its last days
- Germander Speedwell
- Bramble
- Rough Hawkbit
- Herb Bennet
- Herb Robert
- St John's Wort
- Figwort
- Common Mallow
- Common Ragwort
- Hawkweed Oxtongue
- Goat's Beard
- Burdock
- Common Knapweed
- Black Medick
- Pineapple Weed



Manor Park in the lovely June sunshine

Meanwhile, the highlight of working in the garden is the sight of a Hummingbird Hawkmoth feeding on the dense cluster of Red Valerian, which seems to be its favourite plant as this is the same plant I saw one on last year.

The warmest day of the year so far, with close to 28C recorded in London, with the temperature forecast to rise into the 30sC in the next couple of days. Meanwhile, the south of France has hit 40C for the first time this early in the summer and Spain has recorded 42C! The warnings keep coming!

June 16

At the end of another warm day get the opportunity to capture another lovely skyscape over the valley - a perfect subject for b&w.

Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 16 1915

Whilst in the chalkpit, we could distinctly hear big guns going off like thunder in Flanders [2nd battle of Artois], but could not hear them in the open.



June 17

On the hottest day of the year so far, with the temperature in the sweltering capital pushing into the low 30sC, there is a lovely refreshing breeze along the top of Colley Hill on the North Downs, with its stunning views.



Also take in the walk around the adjacent Gatton Park (below), where it is noticeably warmer when sheltered from the breeze.



June 18

A cooler day, much more pleasant for walking, and although, apart from a brief period of light drizzle, it remains dry. However, there is the heaviness in the air gives the feeling of an approaching storm.

While walking around nearby Farleigh, I pay a visit a visit to the pond we did major clearance work on in November to see how it is progressing.



Farleigh pond before clearance work – Nov 2021



Half of the removed vegetation & silt



Cleared pond – Nov 2021

The last time I saw the pond, at the completion of the clearance work, it was looking very bare. Now the bank is again bursting with vegetation and a patch of pink water lilies is providing colour to the water's surface.





Stunning display of Ox-eye Daisies, Common Mallow and Wild Carrot on Farleigh Green

Below: Common flowers on Farleigh Green



Common Mallow



Meadow Vetchling



Common Restharrow

As darkness falls the heavy rain that the skies have promised all afternoon duly arrives, accompanied by thunder and lightning.

June 20

Not as warm as the last few days, but still a sunny last day of astronomical spring. Yesterday evening's rain has freshened the air.

Walking in the local woods, the canopy is now closed over and the sunlight can only get through in random places to spotlight small patches of the woodland floor or clusters of leaves, lit up against the dark background. The leaves have lost their fresh green of spring and have taken on the darker, harsher green that signals the coming of summer, as they take on a toughness that will defend against attack from myriad hungry invertebrates.

Yellow leaves are all that remains of last month's spectacular carpet of wild garlic.



June 21

Today is the Summer Solstice and the longest day, and yet again it seems to have arrived before we are ready for it. With the best of summer still to come (we hope), this point in the cycle of the year represents the height of the sun's power and the start of its decline.

Scotland will benefit most from the longest day, receiving 18hrs of daylight (with sunrise around 04:15 and sunset around 22:20) – nearly 11hrs 30mins more daylight than on the shortest day. Meanwhile, South-west England will receive just short of 16hrs 30mins of daylight (with sunrise just after 05:00 and sunset just after 21:30) – nearly 8hrs 30mins more daylight than on the shortest day.

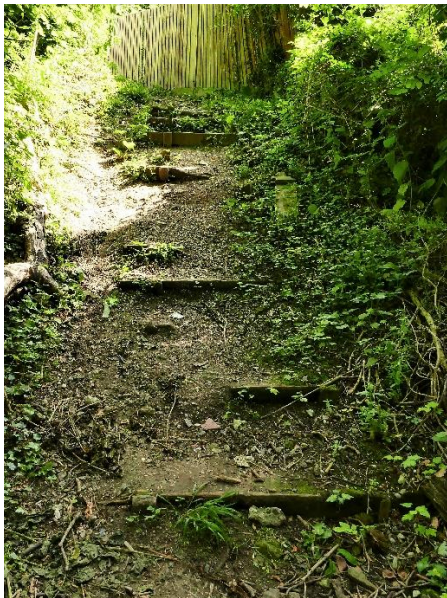
Today is celebrated as the festival of Litha, the opposite side of the year to Yule (the Winter Solstice and the shortest day), another of the fire festivals. Although its origins are obscure 'Litha' is supposed to mean 'wheel' and is possibly associated with the ancient ceremony where a wheel was set alight and rolled downhill. Fire was also used to drive out evil and to bring fertility.

Step Replacement at Winders Hill on the North Downs Way

A lovely sunny morning greets the longest day of the year and the start of astronomical summer. A great morning for a walk up through another of the local woods to Caterham Viewpoint on the North Downs, picking up the North Downs Way to Winders Hill where we are due to replace a set of heavily degraded steps.

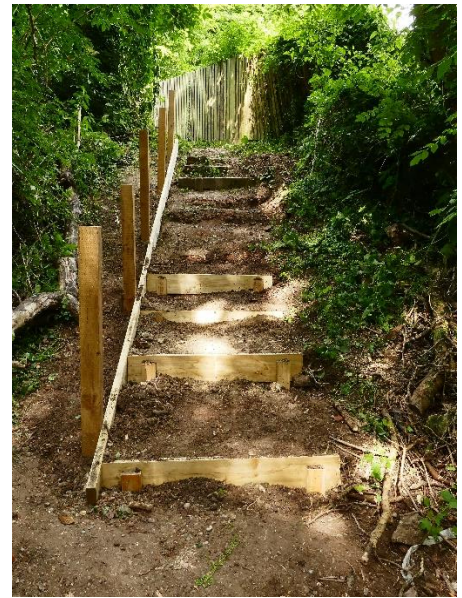


The walk to work in the morning sunshine



The existing steps were installed around 20 years ago and are now heavily degraded (left), not helped by mountain bikers using them as an obstacle course. Having used these steps many times I can attest to how slippery and dangerous they get in winter or after heavy rain.

After removing the remains of the rotten step boards, the first task is to dig a trench down the left side of the slope to take the new side board and posts for the handrail that we are adding.



We can now position the first step and nail the step board to the side board to hold it in position and add overall strength to the structure when it is completed. With the first step in place, we can use it to calculate the positioning of all the subsequent steps. A set-square and a spirit level enables us to get the perfect alignment of the step. By the end of the day, we have one side of the steps boarded, the 5 handrail posts installed and 4 of the 13 steps replaced (above right).

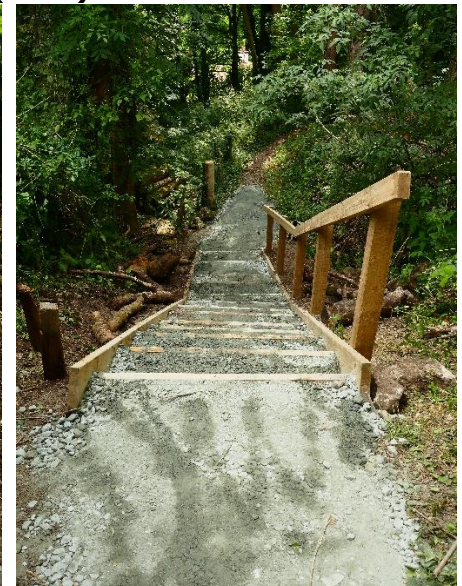
Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 21 1918

Out on Rifle range [the valley at Tillingdown]. Shrike behind target pit, 3 young and 2 eggs. Saw a Sparrowhawk being mobbed by 3 or 4 Lapwings on Stoney Hill. Family of Jays out in Birchwood. Saw several broods of Great Tits, a cock Yellowhammer feeding young and a pair of Common Whitethroats in Tillingdown chalk pit wood. Could not find nest.

June 23

Step Replacement at Winders Hill on the North Downs Way (cont.)

Start the day by completing the new flight of steps, after which the last of the side boards can be installed down the right-hand side. Meanwhile, the handrails are attached to the posts, which are then cut to a uniform height, level with the rail. The steps are then levelled off by removing excess soil and filling in any dips. A layer of crushed stone is then added to complete the surface and compacted. The final task is to use the remaining crushed stone to resurface the section path immediately below the steps, where it tends to get very muddy and slippery in the winter. Thankfully, the forecast thundery showers amount to just one brief heavy mid-morning spell, following which the sun comes out for the rest of the day.



Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 24 1916

Went to Godstone with Captain R [Captain Reeve]. We examined Sand Martin colony near Kelsey's Mill [Leigh Mill] about 100 nesting holes, ledge below covered with droppings and a half a dozen young ones of different ages lying dead, no doubt from their positions turned out of different nests. Found the Wagtail's nest on opposite side of water fall to the one found by Capt. R and self in May. Lower downstream found Wren's nest with eggs in it.

June 25

Over the past few years in Manor Park there have been amazing displays in excess of 400 Pyramidal Orchids, mostly appearing in a couple of areas.

Today I count in excess of 1,200! flowers, which have greatly expanded their range across the site, appearing in at least 6 areas of 40 or more, with the largest swathe consisting of over 450!!



I don't know the exact reason for this year's substantially greater display, but I have to wonder if it has a lot to do with getting the annual cut delayed until the orchids have finished. Normally, the contractors would have been on site in the coming week and would have mowed them down at their peak. Now, they cannot cut before the last week of July (although I would have preferred another month, but compromises had to be made... until the local authorities start to value our endangered natural environments and wildlife over convenience).

A wealth of other flowers (all vital foodsources) that have been saved from an early cut –

- Common Spotted Orchid – just starting to go over
- Bee Orchid – only see the one, below the grazing enclosure
- Hawkweed Oxtongue – a tall plant with dandelion-like flowers
- Common Cat's-ear – another plant with dandelion-like flowers
- Meadow Cranesbill (below)
- Greater Yellow Rattle – now mostly gone to seed (after which it gets its name, as the seed rattle in the pod)
- Hedge Woundwort
- Nettle-leaved Bellflower (below)



- Daisy
- Ox-eye Daisy – the numbers have greatly increased all across the site
- Bird's-foot Trefoil
- Rosebay Willowherb
- Broad-leaved Willowherb

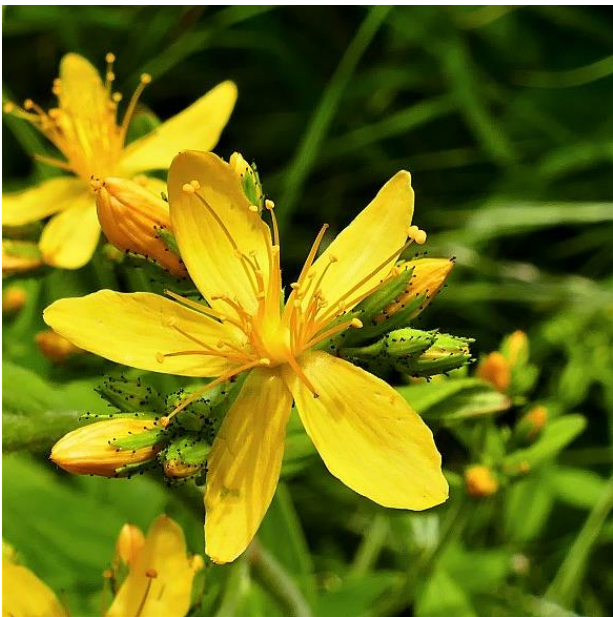


- Germander Speedwell
- Goat's Beard – also known as Jack-goes-to-bed-at-noon after its characteristic of the flowerhead closing at around midday
- Agrimony
- Rough Hawkbit – yet another dandelion-like flower
- Black Medick
- Herb Bennet

- Common Hogweed (below) – complete with metallic-green Thick-legged Flower Beetles



- Self Heal
- Silverweed
- Hedge Bedstraw
- Bramble
- Dandelion
- Pineappleweed
- Greater Plantain
- Ribwort Plantain
- Burdock – as used in the drink Dandelion and Burdock
- St John’s Wort (below)



- Meadow Buttercup
- Common Knapweed (below)



- White Clover – easily the most numerous plant, appearing all over the site
- Red clover – another clover appearing in abundance
- Green Alkanet – by the car park entrance
- Hedge Bindweed
- Common Dock
- Common Nettle
- Common Sorrel

A bit cloudier, chillier and breezier than of late, which may explain the lack of butterflies – apart from a handful of Meadow Browns and a couple of Marbled Whites (below).



Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 25 1905

Got some beautiful Cuckoo and Pipit photos today.

[Richard Kearton’s Surrey Field Notes 1900-1927 includes an amazing photo taken in the wild of a cuckoo perched on a branch being fed by a tree pipit – all the more amazing when you consider the year and the photographic equipment available.

June 28

Condition Assessment at Hooley Meadows

Today sees the first condition assessment of the summer – a scientific exercise conducted on our managed sites to record their current state, so their conservation status and progress can be recorded against previous years. This is done by taking the measurements of 20 random quadrats (on this site this is split between 10 in the Top Meadow and 10 in the Bottom Meadow). The content of each quadrat (each a meter square section of grassland) is then examined and recorded – concentrating on:

Av sward height (the average height of the vegetation, which should preferably be low, meaning that the smaller, delicate wildflowers are not being out-competed by grasses and rougher vegetation).

%Herbs (an indication of how much of the quadrat is taken up by wildflowers – the higher the better, as good quality chalk grassland can have up to 50 plant species per square metre).

%Scrub (the percentage of the quadrat taken up by scrub – e.g. hawthorn, bramble, wild rose – while some scrub is acceptable, a high percentage will indicate a problem).

%Bare ground (another indicator that the site has a problem is this is too high).

Desirable species (a list of 33 species that would ideally be found on good quality chalk grassland – the more found the better).

Undesirable species (species that should not appear in large numbers, such as common ragwort and spear thistle).



Tools of the job:

1m square quadrat

Tape measure (for working out sward height)

Wildflower book (for identification)

Condition Assessment form

Both top and bottom meadows are showing the obvious impact of late grazing. The Top Meadow (below) has very little grass and also a dearth of wildflowers. What should, at this time of year, be a flower-rich meadow is anything but – across the 10 quadrats the percentage of herbs recorded averages just 30%, ranging from 5% to 60%.



have to remember to return in a few weeks to see how the site has changed once it has a chance to recover.

Meanwhile, in the lower field, in the absence of mowing or grazing, the tough grasses seem to have had a chance to really thrive and the cattle don't seem to be doing much to deal with it. The herbs have therefore largely been out-competed and swamped.

The extremely dry spring has probably greatly stunted a lot of the growth. It is noticeable how brown the grass in the lower field is. Over-arching this is the increasing impact of Climate Change, which points towards longer, drier summers, putting far more stress on our flora.

There has to be a question as to whether the flowers are here in the first place, dormant in the soil, waiting for the optimal conditions to emerge. If the flowers aren't here, where would they suddenly appear from to improve the resident population? Something else to look out for when I return in a few weeks.

I also have to wonder if residual chemical spray from the adjacent farmland is adding to the impact, especially if herbicides have been used on the current wheat fields. Recent research into insect decline has highlighted the extent to which adjacent meadows are impacted by crop spraying! Meanwhile, are we also seeing the spiralling impact of the declining number of pollinating insects? Is this a vicious circle whereby less flowers lead to less insects, which leads to less flowers... If so, this would potentially be a big argument against spring/summer grazing, especially on land that isn't cut for hay. If there is a weakness in these condition assessments it is that they fail to record resident invertebrate populations.

It will be interesting to see the progress of the site over the next few years, especially if there is a chance for the herbs to come through without being grazed.

June 29

It is always an exciting time when the young birds start appearing in the garden. Just as this morning's rain stopped this juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker appeared - the first time I have seen it this year.

Juveniles are distinguished by their red skullcap (which adult birds don't have).

Also spot 4 Great Tits at the feeders - 2 of which are probably this year's youngsters from the nest box I installed on the garden shed.



June 30

Today's condition assessment exercise is being carried out on one of my favourite restored chalk grassland sites: Woldingham's Long Hill.



This is one of my favourite sites because of the number of wildflower species and individual frequency of those species across the site, something highlighted by today's assessment.

The assessment is split into 3 areas – the main restored chalk grassland slope, the bridleway verges (where common spotted orchids are particularly numerous) and the newest restored grassland area below the bridleway. As a result, we extended our usual quadrat recordings from 20 to 26.

Overall our findings are as follows:

- Of the 33 listed chalk grassland 'Desirable' species we record 21, which is a very good number for a site (especially considering we recorded only 5 at Hooley Meadows).
- Of the 26 quadrats we record at least 1 desirable species in all 26, with the maximum number of desirable species in a single quadrat of 12!
- The most recorded species are Wild Marjoram (which appears in 25 of the 26 quadrats), Bird's-foot Trefoil (23 of the 26) and Salad Burnet (17 of the 26).
- The average percentage of herbs (wildflowers) recorded across the whole site is a high 60%, with 9 of the 26 quadrats recording 75% and above (the highest recorded was 90%).
- The average sward height is 20cm, meaning that the grasses are not out-competing the herbs. Large sections of the main slope are below 10cm.
- Scrub level is fairly manageable, averaging just over 10%, while bare ground was less than 10%. An exercise a couple of weeks ago to remove some of the young scrub (that I had recorded in the spring as a potential future problem) has reduced its prevalence.
- As well as the 'desirable' species there is plenty of Greater Yellow Rattle and numerous other species adding to the wildflower diversity, such as Bladder Campion, Common Centaury, Self Heal, Goat's Beard, Sainfoin, Common Restharrow, Field Scabious, Wild Strawberry, Herb Robert, Herb Bennet and Hawkweed Oxtongue (to name a few).
- Another issue I highlighted earlier in the year was the prevalence of hemp agrimony, which was having a major detrimental impact upon one half of the main restored slope, where it was swamping and out-competing the other wildflowers. It was subsequently treated with controlled application of herbicide, greatly reducing the number of plants. As a result, this area of the slope has been totally transformed and is now a fantastic varied display of wildflower species.

Overall, the site is looking really good - a great day's recording.



Among the 'other' wildflower species recorded – Field Acabious (left), Common Restharrow (middle) and Bladder Campion (right)

A bit of a grey, breezy day, so not a good day for butterflies, with just a few Meadow Browns, a couple of Marbled Whites, a Large Skipper and a very static Brimstone clinging to a flower stem and looking very sorry for itself. Not many bees about either. However, plenty of grasshoppers and crickets, many of which seemed attracted to the quadrat, taking every opportunity to land and settle on one of the wooden sides of the frame.

As lovely as it is, the biggest issue with Long Hill (along with thousands of other conservation sites right across the country) is that it is effectively an isolated island of conservation. It is surrounded on all sides by trees, nearby fields are grazed free of wildflowers and gardens and lawns are pristine and not attractive to wildlife. Therefore a lot of the invertebrates on the site, especially those without the ability to travel fair distances, are trapped here. Where conservation falls down in this country is in the failure to create joined-up green corridors that link all these fantastic areas of conservation success, allowing invertebrates to migrate from one to another. And this largely comes down to land ownership and management – but that is a whole new topic and one for another time...



Slow worm found under one of the reptile mats on Long Hill

Richard Kearton Field Notes: June 30 1917

Saw a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker running up the trunk of a birch tree in fence between my garden and Miss Reffell's [Burwood', Croydon Rd, Caterham].

Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are now quite rare - I have certainly never seen one in Caterham.