

Urban Countryman

Monthly Field Notes

August 2022

Sadly, all too soon, August is upon us and thoughts turn to the passing of summer. There is feeling of needing to make the most of every day.

It is a time when many wildflowers are declining as, having been pollinated, they move into the new phase in their annual cycle of fruiting and setting seed.

August can be a quiet month for wildlife. Birds are silent and many are hidden away for their annual moult, while replenishing their reserves after the breeding season, either in readiness for migration or to face the winter ahead. August however is a time when the insect world continues to flourish, especially amongst the crickets when many species are maturing and advertising themselves to females. Reptiles, amphibians, dragonflies and damselflies, butterflies and bees all make the most of the summer heat and the glut of available food.

On our farms August is anything but quiet, with the harvest of cereal crops in full swing, with fingers firmly crossed for the dry weather that will make the difference between make and break. However, this year is unlike many others, with the harvest already having been gathered during July, as the hot, dry spell has lead to the south-east receiving less than 10% of its average rainfall.

August also represents the height of the school summer holidays that we convinced ourselves would never end, although the reality was that boredom very quickly set in, especially in an era when we had to make our own entertainment and money was limited. This period was always enlivened by family trips to the seaside, where the wonders of an entirely alien world could be found in rock pools – limpets, anemones, tiny shrimp and scuttling crabs.

August is a month filled with the excitement of warm summer days, tinged with the knowledge that the days are noticeably shortening, with the morning dew announcing that autumn is already on the way, with fruit and berries adorning our hedgerows and trees heavy with seeds and nuts. For those who love the summer it is a month that ends far too soon.

August 1 – Lammas

Today is the festival of Lammas (the Celtic festival of Lughnasadh), celebrating the traditional start of the harvest season and the midpoint between the Summer Solstice, when the sun's strength is at its greatest, and the Autumn Equinox, when day and night are of equal length.

Lammas derives from the Old English phrase *hlaf-maesse*, which translates to *loaf mass*. In early Christian times, the first loaves of the season were blessed by the Church. Carvings representing corn can be found in ancient burial sites, indicating the importance of the cereal harvest. The spirit of the corn was captured in the corn dollies that feature during this festival and are still to be found in many rural districts.

This is the time of 'John Barleycorn', the spirit of the barley harvest who is cut down to feed his people. In the traditional folksong, *John Barleycorn*, the eponymous character endures all kinds of indignities, most of which correspond to the cyclic nature of planting (throwing clods upon his head), growing (they let him stand for a long time till he looked both pale and wan), harvesting (using scythes so sharp to cut him off at the knee) and then death (men with crab-tree stick cut him skin from bone before grinding him between stones). However, he is the ultimate winner as his spirit continues to live on in the bread, beer and whisky that his tormentors consume.

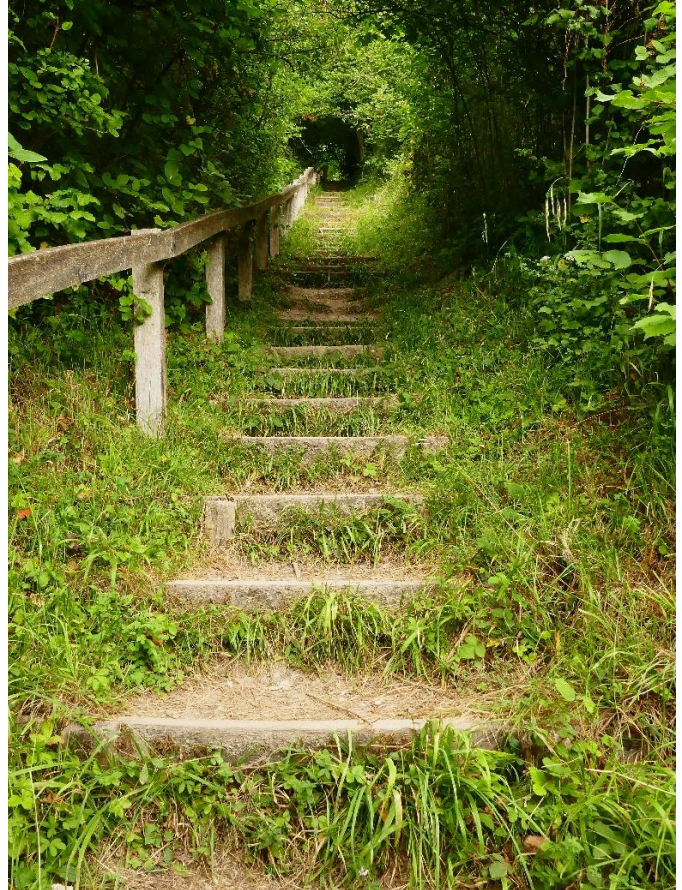


Traditional Lammas loaf

Lammas is also a day of honouring Lugh, the Celtic craftsman god (hence Lughnasadh). Because of this association, this is also a time to celebrate talents and craftsmanship, and it is therefore a traditional time of year for craft festivals, and for skilled artisans to peddle their wares. In medieval Europe, guilds would arrange for their members to set up booths around a village green, festooned with bright, colourful ribbons.

August 2

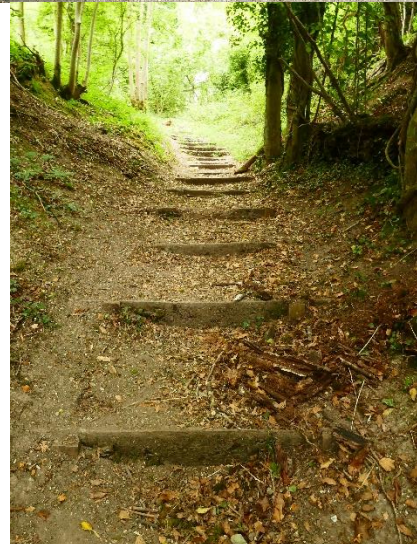
Today sees the start of work to replace the majority of the 110 steps (right) on the steep chalk slope along the North Downs Way at Gangers Hill, where it climbs above the railway tunnel at Woldingham – from the viewing platform you can see where the line emerges from the tunnel and curves away towards Oxted (below).



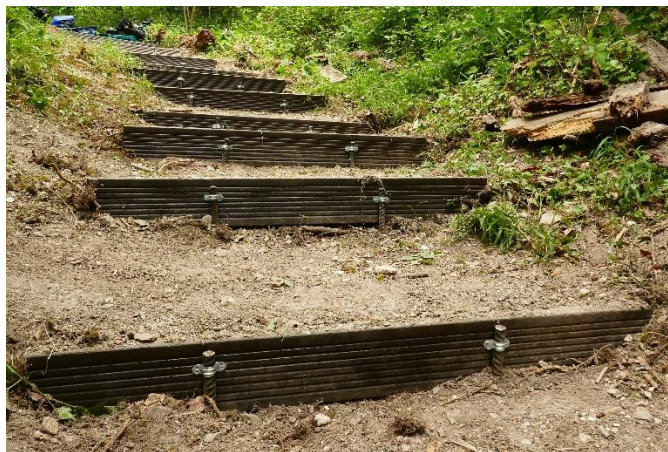
The vast majority of the steps are rotten and in danger of collapse, broken or missing, while some are so tall that they are a challenge going up and dangerous going down, especially when the step below is missing and the ground eroded (below right).



Work starts at the top of the flight (right), where the slope is a lot shallower and there is more space to work. All 23 of these steps are in poor condition and need to be replaced. Even where they appear sturdy, it quickly becomes apparent that beneath the ground they are totally rotten.



Normally we would use wooden risers and stobs (to hold the risers in place) for building our steps but Surrey Rights of Way has requested that we use these recycled plastic ones (right). I'm definitely in 2 minds about these. On the plus side they are hard wearing, long lasting and are made from recycled materials. On the other side they are still plastic and I'm not convinced about using it, especially in the countryside.

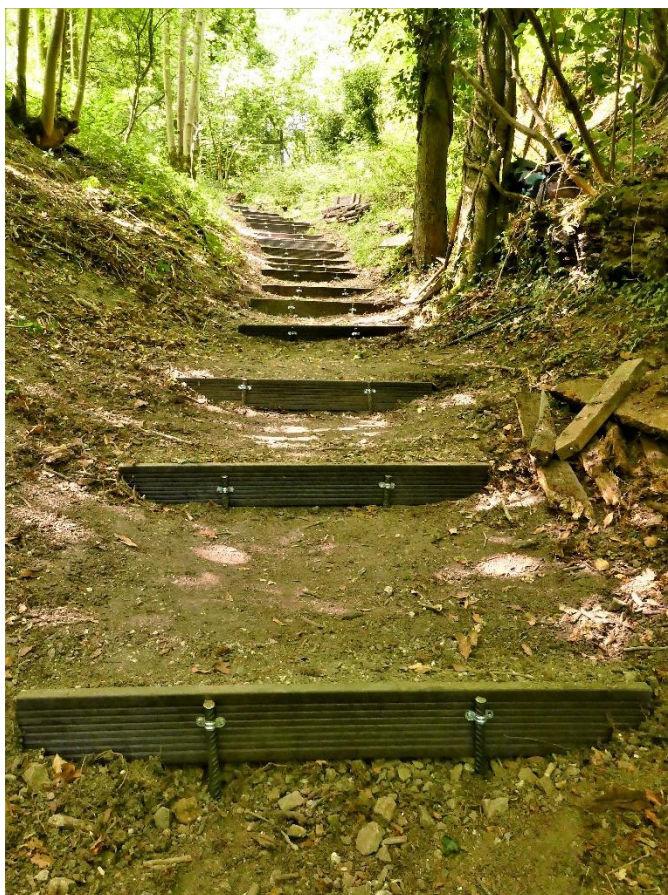


The risers are held in place by a couple of thick metal rods, driven into the hard ground, and attached to the risers by metal brackets.

Another positive is that they are relatively easy and quick to construct and by the end of the day we have installed the first 15 of them.

August 3

Work continues on replacing the steps at Gangers Hill and by the end of the day the top flight (right) of 23 steps is completed.



August 4

The warm, dry weather continues. There has been no measurable rain since the end of June and there is none forecast. The ground is baked hard and when we do dig into it it is just a mix of stones and dust! Hampshire and Isle of Wight are to introduce a hosepipe ban from tomorrow and Kent and Sussex are to follow on August 12. I suspect that Surrey won't be far behind.

Meanwhile, the replacement of the steps at Gangers continues and we have now completed 49, with the steepest section, where the most steps are missing or worn away, still to tackle.

August 5



Walking across nearby Manor Park for the first time since the grass was cut at the end of last month is quite shocking – the ground is baked hard beneath a carpet of parched, straw-coloured grass. There is a total lack of wildflowers and, as a consequence, an equal lack of insects, no butterflies, no bees, no beetles, no hoverflies, not even an irritating wasp. It's enough to make me weep with frustration. If this weather pattern is set to continue, we need to be doing everything we can to support our declining insect populations, not continually decimating their foodsources and habitats!



Only in the grazing enclosure that we sympathetically cut recently (concentrating on the grassier areas, while leaving as many flowers as possible) is there a vibrancy and signs of life – including a lovely cluster of Broad Leaved Helleborines (right and below).



August 6



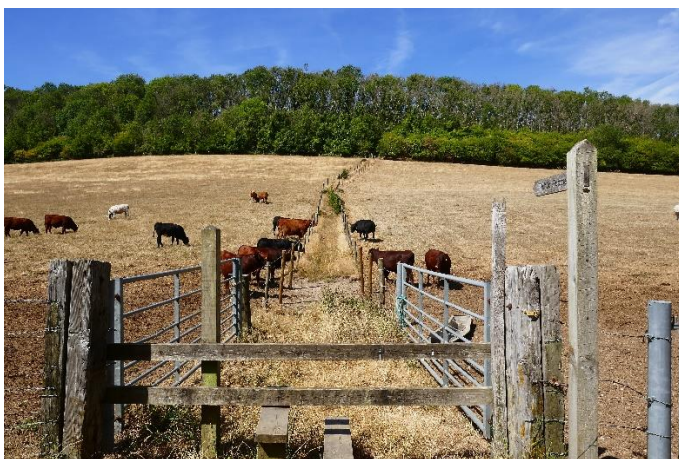
On the way out this morning I encounter this lovely Jersey Tiger Moth. Until recently, restricted to the south-west they now appear to be migrating east, with lots of them being spotted across the region.



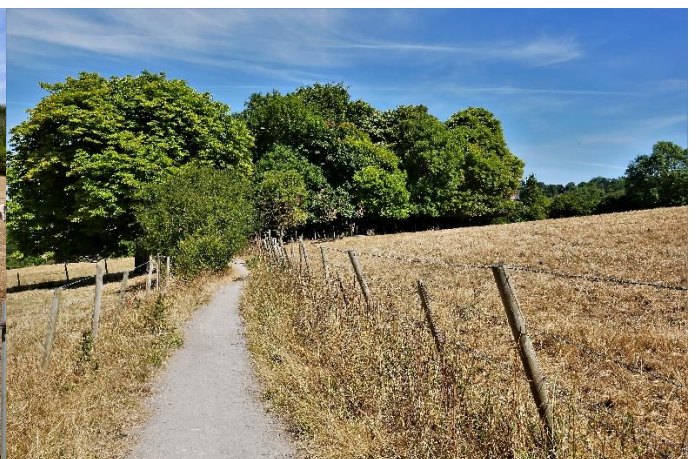
Today's walk takes in the hillside and valley at Tillingdown, the bridleway to Woldingham School, a section of the Woldingham Countryside Walk, part of the North Downs Way, Paddock Farm and Caterham Viewpoint on the North Downs. And all along the way the one thing that cannot be avoided is just how parched and bleached the countryside is. Worryingly, as I see sheep and cattle standing amid dry grass, farmers are reporting having to break into their winter hay stock to feed their livestock.



The valley at Tillingdown



Where's the lush green grass?



Bridleway to Woldingham School



Where the Woldingham Countryside Walk meets the North Downs Way



Paddock Farm

August 7

Today's walk sees a short hop across the county border into Kent for a wander around the countryside at Westerham, taking in the welcome cool shade of Tower Wood.



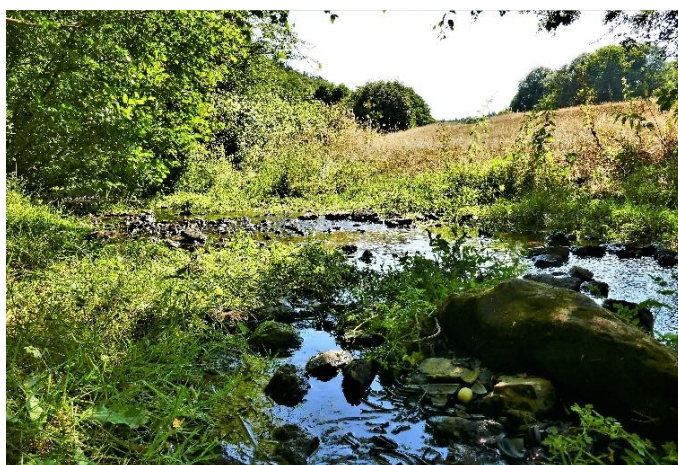
Looking down on Westerham, nestled amongst the trees, surrounded by parched fields, against the backdrop of the North Down.



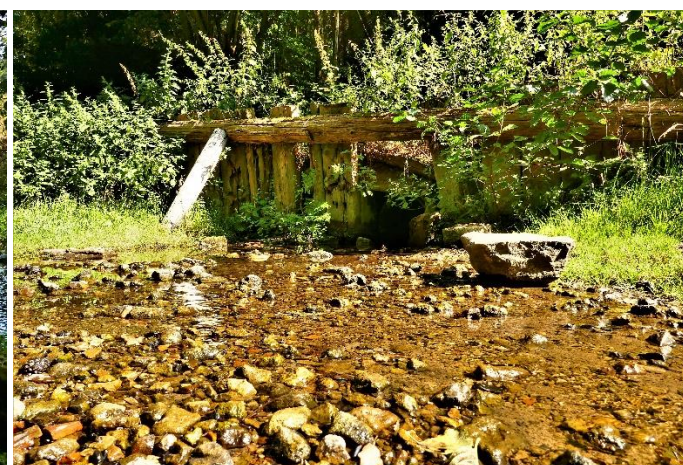
Welcome cool shade of the woods



The parched landscape, where no measurable rain has fallen since the end of June



The cool of a trickling stream

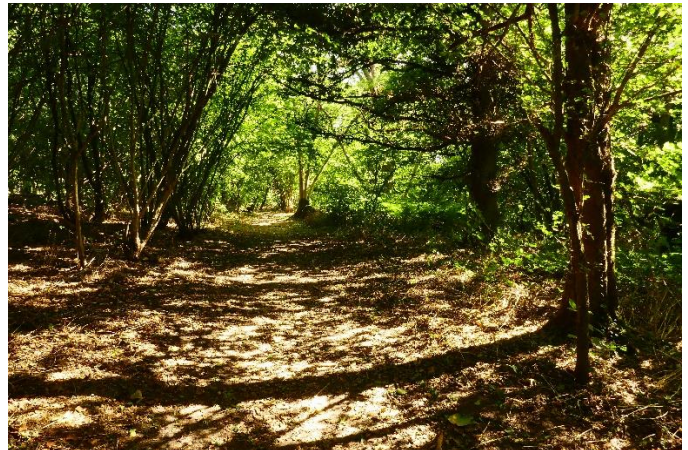


August 9

The grey morning sky quickly clears to another warm, sunny day, with the temperature in the mid-20sC, with over 30C forecast for the end of the week. An Amber Heat warning has been issued for the south-east.

We return to Gangers Hill to continue replacing the rotten, broken and missing steps along this section of the North Downs Way. By the end of the day another 12 have been installed.

At the end of a warm day's work it's nice to warm down with a nice cool walk through the adjacent Great Church Wood.



Most people visited the woods in the early morning before the temperature started to rise, so by mid-afternoon I have the entire wood to myself.

August 10

With the temperature set to soar towards another official heat wave, it is a surprise to awake to find the other side of the valley lost behind a veil of thick mist (right).

However, it doesn't last long. By 9am it has gone, the cloud is breaking up and the sun is coming through, taking the temperature again into the upper 20sC.



Thankfully, we have reached a section of steps that is mostly shaded by overhanging trees. However, when it finds a gap, the strength of the sun makes itself apparent as it hits the back of my neck.

By the end of the day another 11 steps have gone in. With one more day to go, the end is in sight, although it is forecast to be the hottest day of the week, to the point where I know of other conservation groups that have already cancelled their work.

Discover that the original steps were installed in 1989 so, after 33 years it's no wonder that many have rotted to the extent they have.

Left: In action, digging out one of the existing rotten steps.

August 11

By 9am the temperature has already reached 20C, with 30C expected. Ahead of the last day of step building it is nice to make the most of the fresher morning to enjoy a walk around Marden Park wood, situated at the top of the steps.



Despite the parched ground the trees are a deep green, providing dense shade and casting shadows across the woodland tracks and paths.

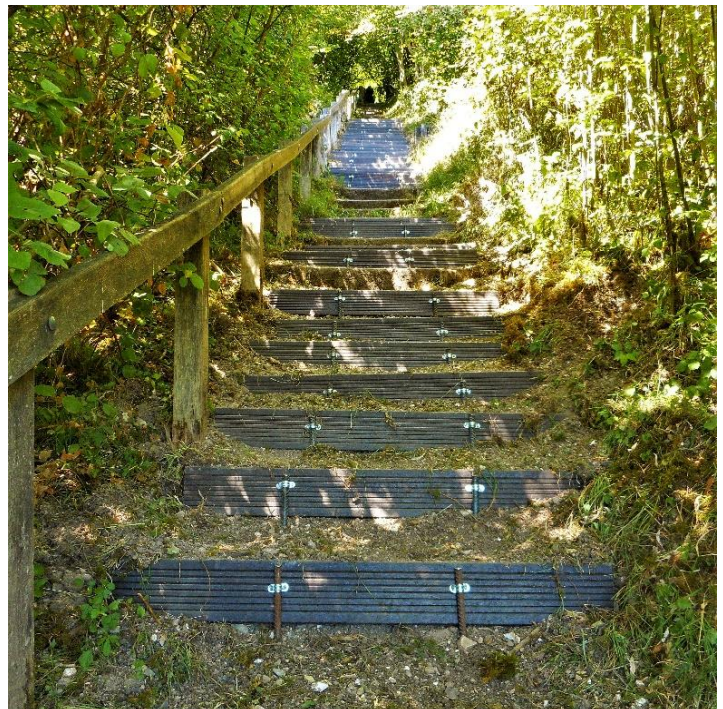


The step-building materials have nearly run out, with just enough for 5 more steps remaining, so we have to be more selective about which of the steps we need to replace in this visit. Thankfully, it also means that we can have an early day, instead of working through the afternoon heat.

By the end, we have replaced 75 of the original 110 steps, concentrating on the most dangerous and challenging sections. On top of that we have installed a further 3 steps to allow us to redesign the sections where the original steps were too high.

The last part of the task is to tidy up the non-replaced steps by removing the encroaching grass and rougher vegetation

6 days of hard, but highly rewarding, work that we hope many people will benefit from.



August 12

August's full moon is known as the Sturgeon Moon - derived from the North American tribes who historically caught sturgeon during this month.

Some parts of the country are now set to announce an official drought! Searing heat across large sections of Europe, drought, wild fires, failing crops – after 40 years of denial and inaction maybe people will now start to get the message that climate change is real and its impact will be catastrophic. Yet there are those who are claiming that this is just a 'normal summer', to which my response is -

- The UK has never recorded 40C before and scientists say that this would not be possible without climate change.
- July rainfall was less than 10% of the month average, making it the driest July since 1911.
- So far, this is the driest year since 1976.
- 9 of the 10 hottest UK days have occurred since 1990.
- The hottest day during the much-quoted summer of 1976 doesn't even rank in the 10 hottest UK days (actually it ranks 13th).
- The hottest day this year was 4C hotter than the hottest day in 1976.

This is not just a normal summer.

Another concern is the stress our trees are being placed under in these extreme conditions. Many may respond to these conditions by discarding limbs and branches and may be weakened to the point where the autumn and winter storms could cause devastation. One of the signs to look out for this autumn will be fungi seeking out root and structural weaknesses.

August 13

One of the things this summer has bought us is a series of stunning evening skies.

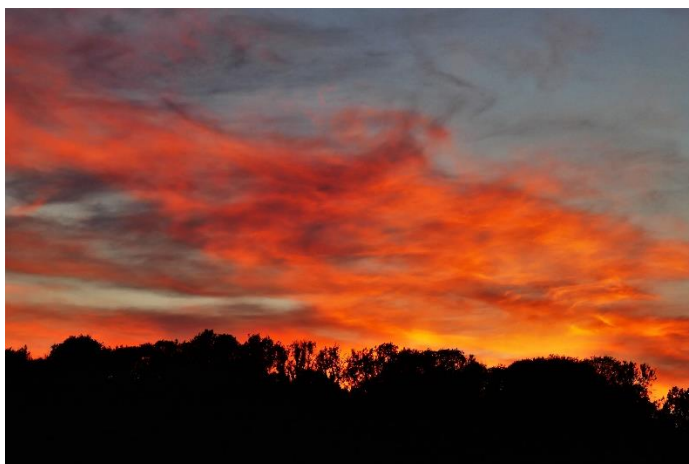
11pm – The temperature in the house is still 26C, making for another uncomfortable night's sleep.

August 14

Another day of mid-30sC heat!

August 15

The last day of the forecast 30C temperatures.



August 16

At last RAIN!!

For a brief period towards the end of the morning the rain is torrential – the first measurable rain we have had since the end of June. It is most welcome, even it does call a halt to work. For around an hour the sky remains heavy and the rain beats down, although it will make very little difference after this extended dry period, other than meaning that I'll get a break from having to water the garden pots.

This week starts with the re-installation of a kissing gate and fence at one of the entrances to the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area (SWCA), part of the South London Downs National Nature Reserve.

Working in the heavy, muggy conditions means that wearing a waterproof jacket fails to keep me dry, as the sweat quickly soaks through my t-shirt, leaving me almost as wet as if I hadn't bothered to put it on!

The original gate hanging post and fence posts have rotted away and need to be replaced to prevent cyclists from using the footpath rather than the nearby bridleway - it is surprising how many walkers comment on having been bullied off the footpath by cyclists.

It's not long after we start digging the hole to take the new post that we find the buried remains of the old post, liberally encased in a concrete footing that has to be dug out! The constant clanging of the long-handle metal rabbeting spade is not an encouraging sound, but piece by piece we break up the concrete and remove it from the hole.



With the hole dug we align and install the new post, mark and drill the holes to take the gate brackets and hinges, after which we can re-hang the kissing gate (above).



With the hanging post and gate installed we can start to align the replacement fence, digging in the first of the fence posts and, with a little bit of basic carpentry, getting the top rail attached by the end of the day (left).

August 17

Another heavy, grey, muggy day, with the feel of more storms in the air.

Continuing on from yesterday's work we attach the last 2 rails to complete the level section of the new fence. Then with the next fence post installed on the slope we calculate the angle of the join required to add the trio of rails that run down the slope to prevent cyclists bypassing the fence and gate construction.

Thankfully, the storms that have been threatened all day stay away until we have nearly completed work for the day. However, when it comes, it really comes – water is streaming down the hillside roads, lakes are forming along the main road, the drains are proving incapable of dealing with the sudden deluge and water is bubbling up from the manhole covers, threatening to lift them!



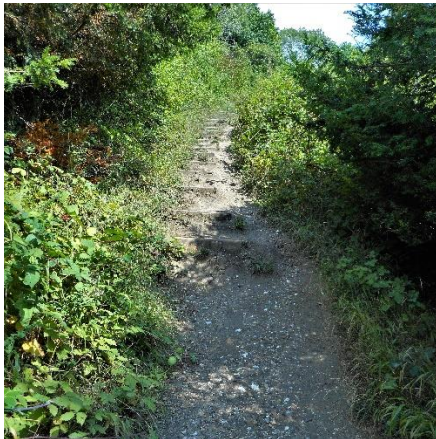
For the first time in ages I have to scrape the mud of the bottom of my boots when I get home.

August 18

The next task for this week is installing this glass-fronted, cabinet style information board (right) on behalf of Whyteleafe Parish Council in the corner of Whyteleafe Recreation Ground (below).



This is one of those tasks where the post holes have to be the correct corresponding depths (allowing for any slope) and correctly aligned before the heavy, constructed board can be dropped in. This is definitely a task where the experience of have done quite a few similar installations comes in handy.



With an afternoon left we manage to complete 3 more replacement steps along the flight in the corner of Whyteleafe Rec. After the recycled plastic of Gangers Hill it's good to be back to using wood again, and in much cooler conditions.

Left: Steps to be replaced.

Right: Steps replaced so far.

Work will continue in a future task.



August 19

After the morning's grey drizzle the afternoon has brightened up, with warm sunshine that has lost the high heat of last week. It's perfect for getting the boots on for a local walk to Farleigh.

The walk passes beneath Woldingham Viaduct, along Butterfly Walk (with its views along Halliloo Valley and the surrounding countryside) to the top of Bug Hill, through Blanchman's Farm Nature Reserve to Warlingham Green, along Mint Walk and Crewes La to All Saints Church, then over to Great Farleigh Green. Along the way I pass a number of ponds that I have worked on, so a perfect opportunity to check out how they have faired in this summer's extreme weather conditions.



Taking the cross-country (left) route to pass beneath the towering Woldingham viaduct (centre) towards Bug Hill and Butterfly Walk (right)



Views from the top of Butterfly Walk across the surrounding countryside, including along Halliloo Valley (right)

Having climbed to the top of Bug Hill I pass through Warlingham's Blanchman's Farm Nature Reserve, where I stop off to visit the pond (below left) that I have helped work on over a number of years. The water level has dropped significantly over the last couple of months, revealing the mass of vegetation that is normally hidden below the waterline.

Meanwhile, just outside the nature reserve is another pond, Willy's Pit (below right), that we have regularly cleared over many years. The last time we were here was December 2020, when we did major clearance work. Now, less than 2 years later it is again swamped in vegetation, highlighting the need for regular pond maintenance.



Without maintenance of ponds such as Willy's Pit, the vegetation will continue to spread to eventually choke the pond, reduce water and oxygen levels, increase silt levels and reduce open water habitat, resulting in a depletion of its wildlife value. Added to this are the invasive species that have been deliberately introduced, such as crassula (Australian Stonecrop), parrots feather and duckweed. All of these will form thick blankets that will kill the pond by preventing light getting beneath the water's surface. Sadly, some 'well meaning' people have taken plants from their own choked garden ponds and introduced them to the wider environment. They can also be transferred from pond to pond on the feet of ducks, geese, etc. And once they are in a pond they are near impossible to eradicate, so will continue to reproduce and need to be continually kept under control.

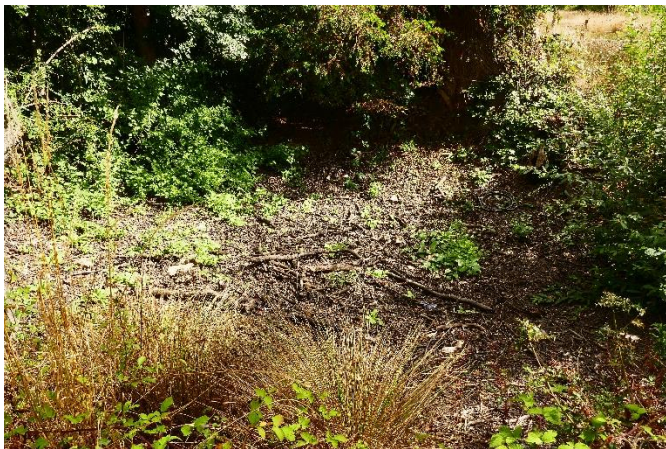
Arriving at Farleigh Green gives me the opportunity to check on the progress of the trio of pond we worked on in November 2021.



Farleigh Green (left), where the colour of the uncut grass and lack of wildflowers (and consequently the invertebrates that rely upon them) will forever be my memory of summer 2022.

The main pond (right) we worked on took us 4 days to clear of tonnes silt and vegetation (included the dreaded highly invasive *Crassula* (Australian Stonecrop / New Zealand Pygmyweed), which has to be carefully removed from site.

In mid-June the pond was full of water and looking really good. Now, just 2 months later it is just a dry hole.



The second of the Farleigh ponds (left) is quite small and in a secluded spot – many people I have spoken to don't even know it's there, despite passing it numerous times. Again, in June this was full of water, but is now bone dry.

The 3rd of the ponds (right) hasn't suffered from drying up, as the other 2 ponds have, probably due to the shade provided by the overhanging trees and vegetation. However, it has its own problems, as it is now blanketed in thick vegetation which is in danger of suffocating the pond, keeping out the light and diminishing the oxygen level, to the detriment of the life in the pond.

This has been a really tough year for wildlife in all sorts of ways



One thing I notice is how many acorns (below left) are about, amazingly plump given the extreme lack of water this year. Trees go through cycles, having occasional 'mast' years, where they produce a heavy crop of seeds. However, this takes a tremendous amount of energy, so they can't do it every year and divert that energy into growing instead. This looks like a mast year, following last year's dearth.

At the same time the oak trees are sporting a number of Knopper Galls (below right), which are formed when a gall wasp injects an egg into the base of a forming acorn on a Pedunculate (English) Oak.



This causes a chemical reaction that forms the knobby gall in place of a normal acorn. The grub hatches within the gall and emerges in the following spring and a second generation then develops within the catkins of a Turkey Oak - meaning that 2 species of oak tree are required to complete the wasp's lifecycle.



August 20

Today's much shorter walk takes in nearby Manor Park where, after the decimation by the mower blades at the end of last month, a few hardy flowers are making a valiant late-summer appearance, probably encouraged by this week's much need rain.

- Bird's-foot Trefoil is by far the most numerous of the newly emerged flowers and appear across all the fields, although not as dense as previously.
- The dandelion-like Cats-ear is dotted across the site.
- Common Ragwort and Knapweed are both hanging on in areas where the mower blades couldn't reach - both popular nectar sources with myriad invertebrate species.
- Red Clover, previous numerous, is showing in small numbers.
- Common Fleabane appears in a single dense cluster, poking through the fenceline of the grazing enclosure.
- Ribwort Plantain looks battered but is just about hanging on.
- A small number of Field Scabious.

The other disadvantage of the mowing is that it reveals just how much dog shit has been left by irresponsible dog owners, most especially closest to the car parks and parking spaces along the bottom of the site. Our precious green spaces are NOT dog toilets, please do not treat them as such!

August 21

The day follows the pattern of the previous two - a grey, cloudy morning breaking to a blue, sunny afternoon.

The wood behind Caterham school is increasingly one of devastation. The ground is deeply rutted where the heavy forestry machinery has removed hundreds of diseased ash tree, the discarded limbs and branches of which are scattered everywhere, like the bleached bones of an uncovered mass grave. They snap and crack underfoot and lay in wait to trip the less wary. Elsewhere, paths are blocked by fallen trees and giant limbs, either collateral damage from the clearance work or due to the stresses of the extreme dry weather on already weakened or diseased trees.

In the long woodland glade are numerous late summer flowers, including dense clusters of Common Fleabane (right top) and spires of Dark Mullein (right bottom).

The smoke from the burned leaves of common fleabane was once used to dispel fleas, a common problem among the straw bedding of poor households.

I also encounter clusters of Dryad's Saddle fungus (a fungus that often appears during July/August) on rotting tree stumps (below).



August 22

The pretty Box-tree Moth is from Asia and was first recorded in Britain (Kent) in 2007, since when it has spread rapidly and is now increasingly encountered across the south. I encounter this one (right) after it flies in from the garden.

However, its looks hide a much darker side, as the caterpillars of this moth feed on box leaves and can strip a tree or hedge in rapid time, making them a major pest species. Luckily, I don't have any Box, otherwise its presence would have me running out on a caterpillar hunt.



Even allowing for the grey sky and drizzle the light is fading fast by 8:30pm. The evenings are now noticeably drawing in and, despite the drought conditions and muggy nights, there is the distinct feel of autumn approaching.

August 23

The varied work of a countryside volunteer – today is spent replacing a couple of missing finger boards on signposts in Chipstead village.

The first one (right) fits easily and is soon in place and secured. The second is a different matter, as the board is too wide for the slot into which it has to fit. And, helpfully, we don't have a chisel which would have made short work of the problem. However, being a volunteer teaches to you to be resourceful and how to improvise with whatever you have to hand – a saw makes for a replacement surform and the job is eventually completed.

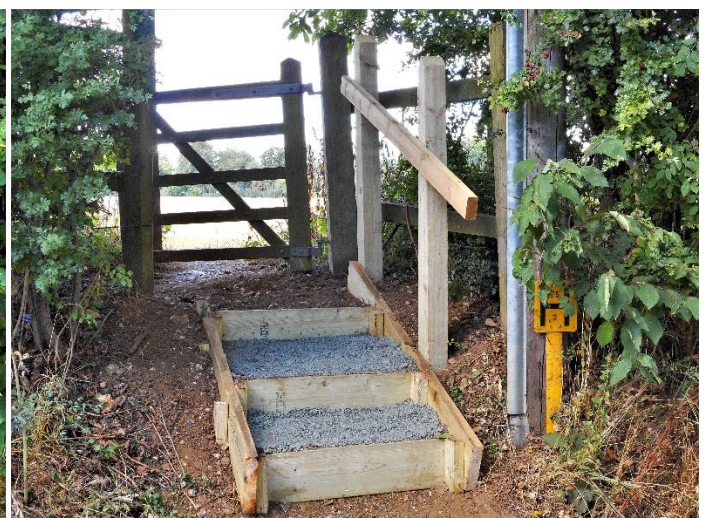


August 24

Today we stay in Chipstead village to replace a dangerously worn flight of footpath steps that lead out onto a narrow, but surprisingly busy, country lane. The steps are also placed at one of the key passing points for traffic, meaning that vehicles pull right over onto the verge, endangering anyone who might happen to slip down the bank slope onto the road.

There is not much to the existing steps, just a single board on the slope, making the bank challenging in the current dry conditions, I can only imagine what it is like when wet and muddy. Working on the slope right beside the road obviously has its own challenges, as does the telegraph pole and wires buried beneath where a bottom step would go. Telephone wires aside, we abandon any plans for a bottom step, as it quickly becomes clear that passing vehicles pull over so close to the bottom of the steps that any obstruction would be a danger to passing traffic.

The first task is to dig in the posts for the handrail, which will anchor one of the side retainment boards that will form the solid box for the new steps. With the board in place, we can now position the top step board and work out where the remaining steps will be positioned. Then, with the steps in place we can add the retaining board on the other side. All that remains is to secure the handrail and add crushed stone to the steps to create a non-slip surface. Another satisfying day's work.



Left: Steps before

Above: Steps after, complete with new handrail.



Get home to find that the Goldfinches are back in the garden. Three juveniles are joined by 2 adults and it is clear to see the difference between them – the juveniles (left) have the same wing colouring but don't have the striking red and black head colouring of the adults (right).



August 25

Spectacular overnight storms give way to a very wet morning, as the much-needed rain arrives, although days and days of this will be needed to make a real difference to the levels needed. Unsurprisingly, today's work is cancelled.

August 26

After a misty start the sun is back again, with clear blue skies.

August 27

A lovely day with really good friends, exploring the countryside around the village of Sarratt, along the Chiltern Way (nr Watford), taking in the River Chess valley (and a lovely pub lunch).

However, the idyllic scenes of the beautiful chalk streams are not all as they appear for this rare and environmentally-important habitat. The farmed watercress beds, which rely upon crystal-clear water, that have been around since Victorian times are in danger of being lost thanks to the untreated sewage that the water company has released into the water. Unbelievable how decades of deliberate under-investment and profiteering has brought us to an appalling situation where water companies think they can justify their wanton disregard for the environment.



August 30

The first of a couple of days at Coulsdon's Happy Valley, brush-cutting the sheep grazing enclosure to remove the dense mass of young scrub - hawthorn, dogwood, wild rose and bramble - that is colonising most of the upper slope and out-competing the wildflowers on this chalk grassland slope.

With 3 brush-cutters roaring away progress is quite rapid and the arisings are soon forming long windrows across the slope.



And, where there is plenty of cutting, there is plenty of raking, as the arisings have to be dragged ever further down the slope to be deposited neatly in the hedgerow.

A big, fat toad (left), encountered in the enclosure, somehow manages to avoid the 3 brush-cutters and rakes, so I've named it 'Lucky'. I wasn't aware of how flat to the ground toads can make themselves, using a slight depression to make itself level with the surface - which probably helped its evasion.

August 31

The second day of brush-cutting the dense scrub in the grazing enclosure on the slope of Happy Valley. We quickly reach the toughest section, where the scrub hasn't been removed for at least a couple of years and is now chest high and impenetrable, a real tangle of hawthorn and wild rose, with a mass of thorns snagging every piece of clothing they come into contact with. Thankfully, the brush-cutters are up to the task.

By the end of the day the slope is cleared of scrub (below left), leaving the grassier, flower-rich (at this time of year mostly wild carrot, knapweed, yarrow, restharrow and some yellow rattle) area untouched for the late summer invertebrates to enjoy (below right).



And nothing makes even the hardest session of brush-cutting go faster that a good old singalong beneath my helmet, safe in the knowledge that, totally drowned out by the roar of the engine, no one else can hear!

For those who have read this far and want to know my brush-cutting song selection for this task:

A Town Called Malice, That's Entertainment, Going Underground, Eton Rifles and Pretty Green by The Jam.

The Changingman by Paul Weller.

Whole Lot of Rosie and Highway to Hell by AC/DC.

Minnie the Moocher by Cab Calloway.

Baker Street by Gerry Rafferty.

And so we reach the last day of August and the end of meteorological summer.

My overriding memories of August 2022 will be one of temperatures in the 30sC, of drought conditions, bleached grass, hosepipe bans, bone-dry ponds and a constant battle to keep the garden flowers alive. This was probably the summer when the impacts of Climate Change came to the UK.