

## MARCH 2014

### Spring has sprung! Wood Anemones in Ryes Lane

As winter recedes and the days slowly begin to lengthen, I always feel that we are emerging from a long, dingy tunnel. Getting further away, but not quite escaped from, those cold, colourless, mid winter months. This year we got away so very lightly, in terms of temperature, albeit drenched half drowned and storm battered. Such a contrast to last year, having shivered our way through one of the coldest and most prolonged winters for years. This year most of the plants and flowers around us have got off to a flying start, we found both celandines and primroses flowering on 17th Feb, last year it was towards the end of March before any appeared at all.



What a great display of snowdrops we've enjoyed everywhere, particularly notable was the roadside bank outside Church meadow. I've mentioned this before, but snowdrops link a little bit of natural history with my own family history. Each year at Upper Houses, I seek out some double snowdrops which flower on the bank beside the lane, amidst all the single flowered ones. Their ancestors were planted there by my maternal

grandmother Ellen Theobald, when a child. This was in the 1870s. She lived in a thatched cottage, long since gone, where "Leycroft" now stands. By a strange twist of fate, later on my Paternal grandparents lived in the same cottage and was where my Father was born in 1904. I suppose that it must have been getting on for seventy years ago that my parents first showed me these heroic little survivors and I look out for these special flowers each year now. The cottage is shown in a 1920s photograph, with one of this years blooms inset.

For the past twenty winters at least, a large flock of rooks and jackdaws, usually 500-600 birds, have made their roost in the Belchamp Valley, about a mile beyond and below Bulmer Street.

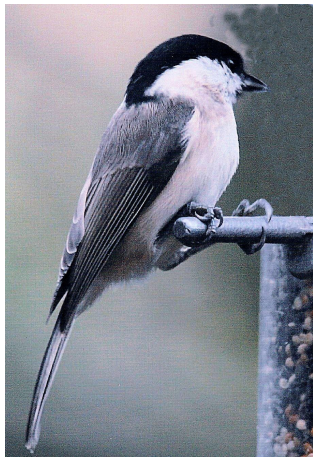
The rooks always well outnumber the jackdaws, the latter making up less than ten percent of the flock. Towards dusk, you can often see them "leapfrogging" from field to field, as they make their way to the tall poplars in the valley, where they spend the night. Some years we hardly see them at all in Bulmer, as for whatever reason, they head out to seek their food in other directions, instead of invading Bulmer's fields. This winter they seem to have targeted us and I have seen them all over the place, behind Bulmer Street, Upper Houses, Lower Houses, Church Road, Finch Hill, Goldingham Hall etc.

Several times they have been really close on the stubble field behind us, busily seeking out worms and other invertebrates from the saturated soil. From time to time they will take wing, often hell bent on displaying their aerobatic mastery, twisting and turning, stalling, ducking and weaving, the air full of ragged black shapes, somehow dodging each other, as they dance in a frenetic airborne ballet. It is a miracle that they don't collide, and underlines the rapid communication between eye, brain, and wing.

These highly attuned reactions are a great asset to them in dealing with the modern world. How many times have you seen them feeding close to the verge on a motorway or dual carriageway? They will feed up to the last second on front of a speeding car, but will always hop to safety at the last moment, to return again within seconds. Seldom do you see *them* flattened on the tarmac.

It's not too usual to see jackdaws on their own around here, they seem to actively seek out the company of their larger relations the rooks, happily feeding and flying with them, in some form of mutual acceptance. Recently however, four carrion crows were feeding on the field and suddenly a group of about 25 jackdaws flew in and milled around, just as if they were going to land with the crows. Having had a good look at the crows however, they flew on elsewhere. Had the jackdaws mistaken them for rooks, until closer on inspection? I doubt if the carrion crows would have tolerated them for long.

Sunday March 9th was amazingly sunny and warm. This mini summer brought out four different species of butterfly in the garden, 3 small tortoiseshells, a comma, a peacock and the dazzlingly bright yellow of a male brimstone, together with the less flamboyant female. We thought that this was doing well that was doing well, but Hugh and Veronica Owen had five species in their garden, the same four that we noted, plus a small white.



Ken and Margaret Mills must certainly be offering the right menu on their bird feeders.

Margaret tells me that one day in early March, they had five different species of tit in their garden. These were the very common blue and great tits, the slightly less common coal and long tailed tits, but the fifth one, the marsh tit is much scarcer. (Marsh tit picture by David Carter) To get them all in one day is pretty exceptional. We were lucky to see two pairs of marsh tits over at Belchamp Walter on 22 January, they were already chasing around and calling loudly, getting in the mood for nesting.

On the mammal front, we had a fine sighting of a small herd of fallow deer on the same day. They were huddled together in the middle of Church Field, Goldingham Hall. When they moved off in the direction of Heaven Wood, I counted twelve of them. I haven't seen so many for quite a while, they clearly hide up well down in the Belchamp Valley.

## JUNE 2014

**Bluebells** ---- surely one of our most showy wild flowers and seen in broad swathes, are a spectacle that vies with any man-made floral display. Our local bluebell woods looked fantastic, a solid blue carpet, only broken by the mossy green trunks of the oaks that soar above them. The best they've ever been

In Wiggery Wood Gestingthorpe, they must have enchanted the children from Bulmer and Maplestead schools, on their weekly visits there. It's great that they all have the opportunity to experience the joys of the natural world in such an idyllic classroom and playground. Of Bulmer bluebells, Deal Nursery between Upper Houses and the Brickyard was truly spectacular, especially viewed from the sunken footpath, which puts them at eye level, enhancing the intensity of the colour.

### **Living history.**

Deal Nursery, now populated almost entirely by oak trees, gets its name from a time in the past when it grew Scots pines (known as deal when converted into timber). These grew to a prodigious height, before being felled in the 1930s. My father said that they were a real landmark, and could be spotted from miles away, so he could always pick out Bulmer. Just one of these remains, not a towering giant, but a poor emaciated tree, now struggling to survive amongst the thriving oaks, so hemmed in that it is impossible to get a worthwhile photograph. The picture here is from Bobby Hawksley's book *Snaps* and was taken by his father in the early 1930's. The name Nursery implies that these trees were nurtured there

from seedlings.



green veined white.

A large and ancient ash tree stands beside the lane, just below Deal Nursery. It reveals the history of several generations of greater spotted woodpecker. I first noticed a nest hole in the tree about 8 years ago, an old one that had been taken over by a colony of hornets. These were sallying forth boldly, thankfully well above head height. I located this years nest hole very high up, just as one of the adult woodpeckers popped out. Looking more closely at the tree, I counted seven old nest holes, each one would have been from an earlier year, as they never reuse them.

During the same walk, from Upper Houses and back, via Deal Nursery and Gallows Green in early May, we encountered encouragingly high number of butterflies. Orange tips headed the list, with somewhere between 30 and 40, many of them mating. There were also god numbers of small tortoiseshell and the odd

The site of Gallows Green has recently been marked by a most interesting piece of folk art. A slender pillar of oak, carved with a scary array of grotesque heads, to remind us of the dark history of this spot close to the Bulmer / Gestingthorpe boundary.

Not yet quite finished, this fine monument will eventually stand on a plinth of Bulmer bricks. The mortar will be lime, produced from chalk dug from the old Goldingham Hall chalk pit. Moreover, Gestingthorpe artist and craftsman Chris Moulton, who works at Bulmer Brickyard, is creating the whole thing himself. A truly local enterprise, from start to finish



It's been another good year for orchids, Adrian Walters took us to one of the Sudbury water meadows where an amazing number of early marsh orchids were thriving, spread over just a few acres of meadow. He had counted something in the region of 1700 blooms.

Mention of these showy flowers leads me on to something of a real puzzle. Visiting an old friend at Gazely near Newmarket we spotted little spike of pink in the corner of her old stone sink garden. She was mystified as to how it had arrived there, except that a friend had last year given her a pot of chives, which she planted in the sink and could have been the source. I thought it was an early marsh orchid, but being unsure, I sent pictures to Martin Sanford, the botanist at Ipswich Museum. He agreed that it was a marsh orchid but was stumped as to the exact sub species and has sent the pictures on to the "National Referee". So watch this space, it could be a first for Suffolk!

To return to Bulmer's flowers, There were good numbers of bee orchids on the footpath behind Upper Houses and leading down to Lower Houses plus one pyramidal orchid . Mid May saw the pyramidal orchids flowering beside Church Road. We counted 12 heads this year, last year there were 7 so they are doing well since the first one came up in 2006. Besides these we saw 3 bee orchids, many heads of broomrape and a good selection of other flowers, including ladies bedstraw and agrimony.

Having completed our monthly bird survey at Lavenham, a group of us were gazing across a meadow, while totting up the numbers. Much to our surprise we spotted a fox, curled up against the hedge, quite close at hand.



As we watched, a disturbance in the hedge drew our eyes on to a couple of her cubs, which emerged and started to frolic around their mother. Almost as good as Springwatch!

Hugh Owen, from Smeetham Hall Lane, kindly sent me the following observations at the end of May.

**In the Garden** \* 2 grey wagtails on the lawn on 19th.  
\* female gt sp woodpecker on peanuts for the first

time since 1st December 2013.

\* The most interesting sightings recently have been the number and variety of young birds in the garden, - greenfinches, blue tits (we had 2 nest boxes occupied with one box fledged), great tit, long-tailed tits, stock dove, collared dove, blackbird, robin

\* Have heard and seen the cuckoo on a few occasions from the garden

Like Hugh, we heard a cuckoo several times from the Belchamp direction, but not after about the middle of May.



These Greater Spotted Woodpeckers were on our feeder, the male is on the left, preparing to feed one of its offspring clinging on tightly beside it.

Finally can I ask if anyone would be kind enough to lend a hand occasionally to help with the maintenance of Little Dean Spinney, our village conservation area, only for an hour or thereabouts every 6 weeks or so. Any help would be most appreciated.

## SEPTEMBER 2014

Well we're coming to the end of another summer and like last year, it's been a pretty decent one.

Unlike last year, when everything in the garden and in the wild was later than usual after a cold, wet spring, this year has to be one of the earliest on record, with many plants coming on to flower a month or more earlier than they did twelve months ago. I first saw a combine working on 4th July and there must have been others getting started well before then.

Talk of farming, leads me on to congratulating Ashley Cooper for winning the prestigious Silver Lapwing Award for farming and wildlife conservation, as reported in the last "What's On". A richly deserved accolade for the entire wildlife friendly habitat that he has created on the farm over the years, and for continuing to manage them so well. Recently, the children of the Sudbury Wildlife Watch Group had great fun netting creepy crawlies in Ashley's new ponds down in the Goldingham valley. As an extra bonus they had an impromptu little talk from archaeologist Dr. Carezza Lewis on the finds from the excavations being carried out on the site of the old Goldingham manor.

Many of our birds nested a little earlier than usual and there is a general feeling among some local birdwatchers that the return Autumn migration has also started slightly earlier. On 1st September we had about 150 house martins swarming around our neighbour's silver birch, most of them young birds. About a week later Hugh Owen had over 50 around Smeetham Hall Lane. These birds were obviously grouping up ready to migrate.



One day around the end of June, when it had been dry for the better part of a week, we were puzzled to find a brimming puddle of water on the track that leads past the Village hall. Our puzzlement turned to delight as about half a dozen house martins swooped down, some just to drink, but others to collect mud for their

nests. The mystery of the ever full puddle was solved however, when Ed Nevard stopped grass mowing to have a chat. He regularly tops it up with a couple of pails of water, just for the martins. As a just reward for Ed's efforts, the Nevards house has five or six martins nests tucked under its eaves. Both house martins and swallows use mud in their nests, but swallows always build inside an open building, such as a barn or stables, usually on top of a beam. I was intrigued once, whilst videoing martins and swallows collecting mud from our pond, to notice a subtle difference in the way in which these two species of bird collect their mud. Both birds of course, pick it up in their beaks, but the swallow, in addition to the mud, always carries a short length of straw or thin stick with it. (see picture) This reinforces the nest, like the straw does in wattle and daub. Another bonus they enjoy in that area, are the flying insects which always abound above grazing meadows and paddocks, which they gratefully snap up to feed their young.



### Living history

To find this piece of living history, take the footpath from Bulmer Street, which skirts the edge of the Goldingham Hall fields to descend into the hidden depths of the Belchamp Valley. As you top the steep drop into the valley, Belchamp Walter Church and Hall stand out above the ageless meadows and woods which grace the valley. As you reach the further side of the meadow and go through the little kissing gate, you come to the end of the "Canal".

This is a long thin lake, bordered by a fine row of ancient horse chestnut and beech trees. The trunks of a couple of the beeches bear graffiti carved over the years by innumerable hands. Whilst not to be encouraged, they can be interesting. Here they are mainly just peoples initials and lovers hearts etc., but on one, in letters getting ever wider, but fainter, as the tree's girth expands, you will read "ITALIA POW". Seventy odd years ago, Italian POWs were billeted in the grounds of the Hall and left their mark here, an interesting record of the past. Many of them were employed in helping out on the local farms. We had a few POWs in Bulmer as well, housed at The Dower House in the Street, but then known as the Cedars. Although I personally have no memories of these prisoners, they produced what must have been one of the first toys that I ever had. Some of them must have been quite skilled at carpentry, for I was given a set of little wooden chickens mounted on a board. By means of weighted strings underneath the board, the little fowls would peck madly away when the board was rocked from side to side. Another I had was a monkey on a stick, or more correctly, on two sticks which were linked together. When the sticks were slid up and down against each other, the monkey performed acrobatics at the top.

Dragon and damselflies have been a little scarcer around our pond this summer, with the exception of the brown hawker dragonflies, which have appeared more often than usual. Unusually, we did have a banded demoiselle visit in early July. These damselflies usually keep to slow moving rivers, such as the Stour. They appear to have had a good year, looking over Ballingdon Bridge around the same time, I saw scores of these colourful insects, fluttering gracefully above the water in a randomly choreographed aerial ballet.

Margaret Mills told me of a fascinating little happening which she witnessed from her kitchen

window. For a few days they had seen a shrew taking crumbs from just below the window. A dianthus growing there had thrown up a fine, upright flower head. As she watched, it slowly toppled over, as if it had been felled like a tree. Looking down she then saw it being towed away into the undergrowth by the shrew. Was it taking it to store for a rainy day?, or the equivalent of a husband going home with a bunch of flowers after a night out with the boys!



Finally I must thank old hand Dennis, and new recruit Sue who kindly answered my appeal for help with maintenance work on Little Dean Spinney. At our last session we were rewarded with sightings of about four common lizards and two absolutely pristine comma butterflies, obviously newly hatched and feeding on the overripe blackberries

## DECEMBER 2014

There seems to have been an unusually large number of jays around earlier this autumn. Wherever we ventured out, almost invariably one or two would cross our path. They are more noticeable at this time of the year, as their passion is collecting acorns, which they then bury to dig out later on, when other food is getting scarce. Of course, they don't find all that they bury, which partly explains why oak little trees spring up all over the place.

The fieldfares and redwings were later arriving this autumn. It was 30th Oct. when I saw my first Redwing and a week into Nov. before I sighted a fieldfare.

It's not unusual to see buzzards, kestrels or sparrow-hawks being mobbed and chased by one or more carrion crows, but wood pigeons and gulls etc, are usually left alone. So I was a little surprised to watch a crow continually dive bombing a flock of wood pigeons feeding on a field at the bottom of Brakey Hill. Having put them all to flight, it turned it's attention to about a dozen black headed gulls that were down on a neighbouring field, scattering them to the four winds in the same way. What had possessed the crow I've no idea, but it certainly seemed to have it in for any other of the feathered tribe!



Fungi were in short supply in October, but I did come across this fine example of "chicken of the woods", (said to taste like chicken, but we've never tried it) growing high on the trunk of a huge crack willow at Liston. On the meadows not far from this, I picked a giant puffball, an excellent edible mushroom, which made us four or five tasty meals.

### Living History

Our local landscape has changed much over the years. These changes have happened gradually for the most part, but occasionally the change is quite rapid. As in the 1940s and 50s, when the demand for higher food production, and economies of scale, led to the removal of miles of ancient hedgerows, to create the larger, more manageable fields we see today. Similar, if less far reaching changes took place in the early 19th century.

This quarter's Living History focuses on hawthorn, and what it can tell us about Bulmer's past.

If you take the footpath leading from Jenkins Farm along the little valley towards Lower Houses, the hedge on your right is, at first, a classic "ancient" hedge, with several different species of tree growing in it and a bit crooked. After a short distance, it changes abruptly, and is comprised almost entirely of hawthorn and is gun barrel straight. This "new" hedge was planted in the early to mid 1800s, when the landowner of the time,\* decided to improve

the drainage and realign the hedges, on what must have been much waterlogged land. Hawthorn was, and is, the ideal shrub for a new hedge, quick growing and once established, stock-proof. Because it was quick growing, it was known as quickthorn and hedges often called just "quick hedges".

\* This was Earl Howe, who owned several farms in Bulmer, having inherited them from the estate of William Jennens, the Acton miser. Jennens was reputedly the richest commoner in England. After his death a long legal wrangle began between would-be inheritors to the estate. Dickens novel "Bleak House" is said to have been based on the Jennens case.

Other "quick" hedges tell much of the landscape history of Bulmer. The hedges on either side of the A131, from the Top of Ballingdon Hill to the entrance of the "Auberies" are of quickthorn. These date from the Bulmer Enclosure Act of 1840.



Up until that date, a wide strip of common land bordered the highway on either side, as can be seen on the map above. This was then fenced off with a hedge close to the road, as the common was enclosed. Bulmer Tye itself was an open expanse, here again, more quickthorn hedges. All of this land belonged to the parish. In a stroke of brilliance, the Vestry and Overseers of the parish, (forerunners of the parish councils) with, obviously, the cooperation of other landowners involved, swapped some of this land for small fields in other parts of Bulmer. This provided allotments closer to the Street and the various scattered hamlets, and not a long trek away on the Tye to cultivate an allotment. One of them is where the School now stands, two others were at Lower and Upper Houses, the former now a paddock, the latter, Little Dean Spinney, the village conservation area. These last two were divided off from larger fields, again they have quickthorn hedges on what were then the new boundaries.

So next time you spot a hawthorn hedge, ask your self what piece of village history it records.

A couple of bird records from Pip Wright's "News from Essex 1720- 1900"

1879 "A rare bird at Burnham- on- Crouch. A *Canada Goose* was shot, part of a group of five". Anything but rare now!

1867 "A fine and beautiful specimen of a bittern was shot on the estate of the Rev J. M. St. Clare Raymond at Belchamp Walter. The bittern is a bird but rarely found in these parts" Hardly surprising, given this one's fate!

Real surprise in the garden last week, a kingfisher paid us a very fleeting visit, probably didn't think much of our fish-less pond. The same day we walked down to the Belchamp Brook, on the way we had a good view of a fox and a little later a woodcock took flight in front of us. Three good sightings, which brightened up an otherwise grey day.

I was going to close with picture of a Christmas robin, but I couldn't resist using this shot of a very dapper nuthatch, which I took in Caroline's garden in Leicestershire a couple of weeks ago.

***The seasons greetings to everyone.***