

# NEWS AND STORIES FROM ABBHEY FIELDS

Fundraising | Egrets | Elms | Improving Access | Nigel Butcher | Smokehouse | Croft Certificates

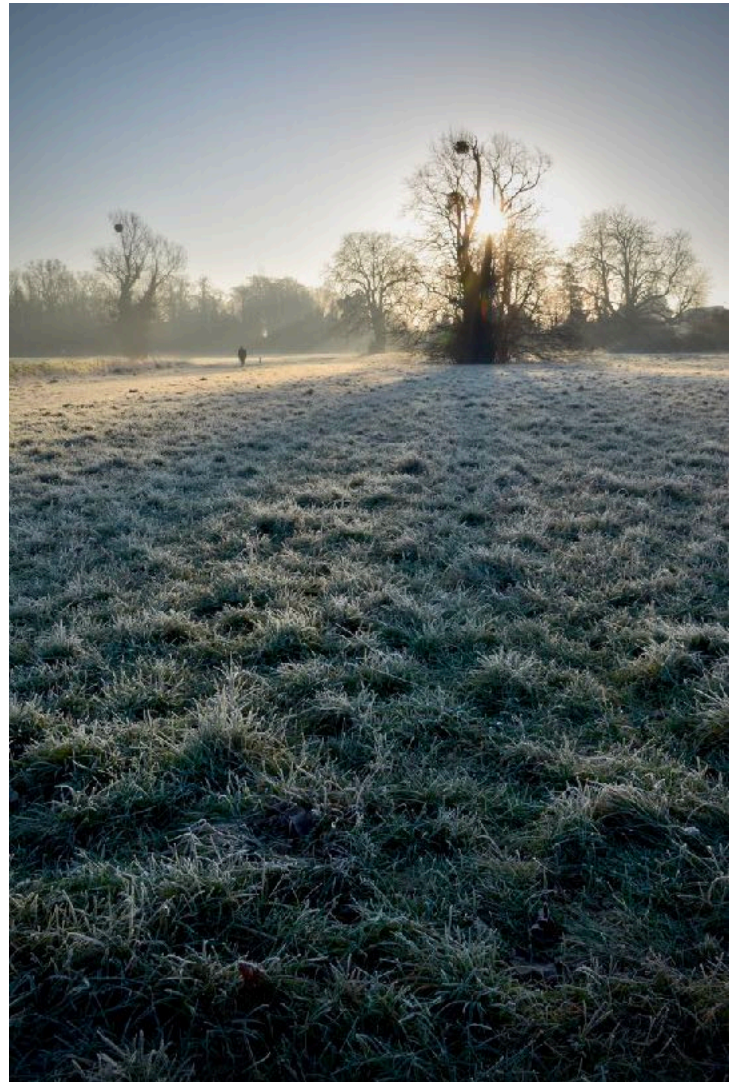
## February 2022

Already at the start of February the first signs of spring are with us. At Croft Close you can hear the Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming on tree branches to advertise his territory, some leaves are starting to burst from their buds and even a few plants are flowering in Long Meadow.

## In this update

Our fundraising campaign kicked off in December, before the year turned and we have already banked over £152,000 from our generous supporters – thank you! More on this important activity below!

Also, in this update we have news about some of the works going ahead to improve access, safety and biodiversity at Abbey Fields together with an interview with Nigel Butcher who is a staunch supporter and acknowledged expert on our wildlife.



**Fundraising Update** We were very excited to at last be able to start fundraising to secure the 15 acres of Abbey Fields (Long Meadow and Croft Close Set Aside) in December. Local people have been steadily fulfilling their pledges made last year and many new people have added their support to the ranks. A totaliser is being maintained on <https://abbeyfields.online/> where you can see progress to the £500,000 target; £152,000 has been raised so far, so there is still some way

to go. Details of how to donate are on the website.

In the next few months, we will be holding several events, supporting the Summer Festival and Jubilee celebrations (see <https://www.hihub.info/>). We hope there will be something appealing to all tastes. Activities will include guided walks and talks. For early risers we may listen to the dawn chorus whilst for those who prefer something later in the day, possible events might be looking for bats, or even just taking in the night sky.

We are hoping to stage a major event in the summer bringing Friends together and at the same time making a welcome contribution to our fundraising campaign. Look out for more news on this!

We are very pleased to have already shared over 250 limited-edition Foundation Croft Certificates with those donating £50 or more – an example will soon be placed on the website and further details are given below. Abbey Fields will eventually be held in perpetuity for the village and the Foundation Croft certificate will be a great memento for generations to come.

However, in case there is any doubt, we are grateful for all donations no matter how small.

## Meet the egrets



If you regularly walk in Long Meadow or the footpath towards Westwick, you may have seen one or more of a family of little egrets, small white herons, perching in the field or swooping low over the stream.

The egret is a member of the heron family and was rarely seen in Britain till the 1990's. The RSPB first noted a breeding pair on Brownsea Island in Dorset in 1996; since then they have gradually moved north and are now quite common throughout England.

Like other members of the heron family, they nest high up in trees and feed mainly on fish but also amphibians, crustaceans, and insects. They have yellow feet which they wiggle in the water to disturb fish, then spear them with their dagger-like bill. The little egret has a black bill but there are two other egret species which are also becoming increasingly common. These are the similar-sized cattle egret which has a yellow bill and the much larger great white egret. All have been seen locally recently.

While egret populations are relatively secure now, they were endangered in the 19th century because their striking head feathers were so often used in ladies' hats. One woman, Emily Williamson, was appalled by the fashion for feathers and was determined to halt the cruel plumage trade that was killing millions of birds and forcing species into extinction. She decided to take action and began by inviting her friends to tea at her home, where she asked them to sign a pledge to 'Wear No Feathers'. This action was the first step in creating the Society for the Protection of Birds, which would become the RSPB.

When you see one of the egrets in Abbey Fields, you can thank Emily Williamson for their survival.

## Improving access and other tasks

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In recent weeks we have made some minor but important improvements to access at Croft Close, including making the main access step free. This is a temporary arrangement as we will shortly be undertaking a more extensive remodelling of the Croft Close entrance (to meet commitments made when Abbey Farm sold the land).

We are also looking to realign the access to the South Pond so that we can keep clear of the ancient oak's roots. Soil compaction is a known problem for ancient trees (such as Sherwood Forest's famous Major oak), often caused, surprisingly, by people walking close to the tree. We hope that by moving the path our tree stays healthy.

Another task recently completed was removing barbed wire from the Park Lane hedge. The wire was becoming embedded in some of the hedgerow tree trunks as they grew: which is not good for the tree!

There are regular work parties at Croft Close and Long Meadow, please keep an eye out on local media and if you want to come along to any event, please email [sitemanagers@abbeyfields.online](mailto:sitemanagers@abbeyfields.online) in advance.

## Abbey Fields' elms

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Many people will have heard how Dutch Elm disease devastated the English countryside by killing this impressive, statuesque tree. Whilst relatively few remain nationally, Abbey Fields still has some mature specimens as well as a good crop of saplings. Sadly, it is rare for such saplings to live more than about 15 years. But as we have mature elms which have clearly not succumbed to the disease, and they are setting seed, there is a good chance that we will get disease-resistant elm saplings. Maybe, an impressive tree will develop.

Whilst important in themselves, the elm is also important habitat for the White-spotted Pinion moth. This is Red Data Book listed and, in the past, has been recorded in Histon.



Elm trees flower in February / March, the winged seeds appear soon afterwards followed by fresh light green leaves in May/June.

## In conversation with Nigel Butcher

In our series of the faces behind the field, Angela Young met Nigel Butcher, Senior Technical Officer at the Centre for Conservation Science at the RSPB. She met him during a path clearing session at the Croft Close Set Aside last October.

The following is a short abstract taken from the interview which you can enjoy in full at <https://www.facebook.com/angela.young.777/videos/240863618033559> . Filming and editing by Young Reporter Emily.



*Angela:* Can you tell us what is special about this site in terms of bird life?

*Nigel:* I had never visited this site until last year during COVID and then I started walking around, like everybody else. And the site is brilliant for birds. It is an audible spectacle, certainly in the summer. Enigmatic species like the turtle dove breed here or have done historically - lesser whitethroat, linnets, lots of other birds. People don't realise that brambles,

hawthorn and blackthorn create a really good nesting environment for these sorts of species. And most people just want to clear it away, but scrub is very important.

*Angela:* We are hearing a little bit of bird song today which for most of us is probably background noise. Do you automatically tune in and think, oh, that's a ...whatever?

*Nigel:* A lot of birds won't sing in the winter. A lot of song will be robins. They call it a winter song. And that's very much one that you hear at this time of year. A lot of the noise will actually happen in the spring when birds are on territory. So, the turtle doves will be singing, the whitethroats, you'll pick up blackcaps, and those warblers that make trips to Africa and return will actually be back here to breed. So that's a key time.



We've got our winter visitors like redwings that are just starting to turn up. I've not had any here as yet, but it's a really important stopover and breeding site.

*Angela:* For a beginner wanting to learn, what is the most easily recognisable winter bird song, maybe the robin?

*Nigel:* Winter bird song is mostly the robin. It comes with practice. You need to hear the call, then see the bird and then have an association.

*Angela:* So how did you get interested in birds? Presumably you trained in the technology, but where did the interest in birds come from?

*Nigel:* As a kid, we had bird feeders and I used to look at the birds in the garden at home with my parents. And then like a lot of teenagers, I lost interest in wildlife. I liked football and cricket and riding my bike and other things come along and it's not cool as a teenager to be into birds. So, I left it for a little bit. And then, I started to go out with my now wife and she and her parents, who were RSPB members, took me to Norfolk and showed me a few birds and then in my twenties I got right back into it. And now I'm, a bit obsessed with the birds and all our holidays are wildlife and bird related.

*Angela:* Well, we are lucky to have you involved with Abbey Fields.

## Stall at Histon Smokehouse

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As many of you will recall, for the HI Friends Christmas weekend we had a stall at the Histon Smokehouse which drew a great deal of attention on the day.

There was an impressive photograph gallery of CCSA wildlife. This, and a continuous loop video including slithering grass snakes fascinated many children and some adults!

The display was completed with maps and information and hundreds of fliers were handed out. £3000 of donations was taken on the day!

We are very grateful to Simon and the Smokehouse team for allowing us to have our stall and we are especially grateful for their kind donation.



## Are you a Friend?

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If you are not already on the mailing list, you can sign up at <https://abbeyfields.online/sign-up> so you can receive occasional updates on progress or even become a Friend (no fee). The sign-up form also enables you to let us know if you are interested in volunteering to help on the land and/or with fundraising.

We are keen to hear from anybody willing and able to help with website maintenance.

Please email any questions or comments to [hello@abbeyfields.online](mailto:hello@abbeyfields.online) .

## Foundation Croft Certificates

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The limited-edition Foundation Croft Certificates are available as digital versions delivered via an email or as a printed version produced on fine card by Print-Out and hand delivered to your door by a volunteer. They can be produced in the donor or donors name or gifted to a family member or friend, up to 4 certificates per donor depending on size of donation.



Photographs on this page:  
Croft Close Set-aside in  
January



Photographs in this newsletter: grass snake by Moira Neal; all others by Guy Richardson

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