

## Welcome to the first newsletter in September 2021!!!

Brought to you by our team of junior reporters, each edition will explore some of the varied bird, tree and other wild-life which lives in the land that a dedicated group of people is securing for everyone in the village to enjoy. We will also bring you news about how that process is going and how you can get involved. Future editions will focus on fund raising plans. There will also be a section on getting to know the faces behind the fields, so to speak.

**NEWS** The Friends of Histon & Impington Green Spaces (FHIGS) is up and running! Video of the inaugural meeting can be found at <https://abbeyfields.online/friends-meeting> Half an hour of great wildlife footage! Find out more and think about signing up on the website to receive newsletters such as this one if you have not already done so. FHIGS now also has a Steering Committee. Four people came forward, and all were elected unopposed. The four individuals are Jenni Ramos (Chair), Jon Pavey, Yvonne Murray and Guy Richardson. They constitute a brilliant core group with diverse skills, a 50:50 gender balance and a 50:50 mix between people who have already been heavily involved and new people stepping up. In due course, they may co-opt additional people to serve on the Committee. And they will certainly be reaching out to the many Friends, who have expressed willingness to volunteer their services in one capacity or another. *Rob Bensted-Smith, Chair, Histon and Impington Green Spaces Charity*

**WILDLIFE FOCUS: TURTLE DOVE LOOKING FOR LOVE**, by Amelia. There is someone out there for everyone, so the saying goes – but sadly not for one resident of the Croft Close Set Aside. Turtle doves could be said to embody love itself; they have often had romantic associations, and in poetry they're frequently connected with fidelity and trust as they can mate for life. We are lucky to have heard the call of the turtle dove and some people had even seen the lonely male in Croft Close Set Aside. He could be heard in July calling out in an effort to court a partner. Some people in the village were asking if there was a lonely female somewhere nearby we could somehow introduce him to. Sadly he did not manage to find love this year and will soon be off to warmer climes.



Photo by Philip Starling

Had he found a mate, our turtle dove would have been a modern man and played his part in caring both for the eggs and the young when they hatch. Incubation lasts about fourteen days. Another fortnight later, the young are fledged. The birds usually migrate in September, setting off for the long flight to sub-Saharan Africa.

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This dainty creature, measuring between 26-28cm, is under threat of global extinction and is on the Red List of Endangered Species partly due to the lack of seed and grain available to them during the breeding season. But this is something local rural gardeners can help solve. By simply providing a water source, such as a birdbath or pond, or allowing hedges beside fields to grow as wild as possible, there is still an ounce of hope for the turtle dove.

**Histon and Impington Green Spaces Young Ambassadors**, by Hannah. *Why formed and what are we going to do?* Members of the village have come together and are trying to protect our diverse green spaces. But there are challenges, for example reducing the fertility of historically agriculturally fertilised soils to natural levels, ensuring areas of habitat are monitored and coming to terms with the harsh reality with where we live we cannot simply 'let nature be'. If green spaces such as woods, grassland and shrubland are left alone without human interaction in Cambridgeshire they are seen as unused even though used by nature. This often leads to the area being used for buildings and development destroying the area's myriad of permanent and visiting species.

Therefore to keep these spaces we must as a community use them whilst allowing human enjoyment and nature to flourish. To survive long term these areas must be cared for and known about for generations to come. The best way to ensure this is by making sure our wild green spaces are the centre of our village's community, for they are priceless in terms of mental health benefits, ecological assets and local history.



Jo, Annabel, Hannah, Charlotte and Ellen with Pippa Heylings

HIGS Young ambassadors was formed to ensure that a diverse age range access and appreciate this site and help these spaces survive. We really care about them and want to ensure young people are actively involved with other Friends in achieving this. We have suggestions including seating to relax and enjoy the outdoors, nature spotter maps, an outdoor EcoFest, outdoor performances, hands-on children's activities, opportunities to work with local schools and groups such as Scout, Guides and Youth EcoCouncil and fund-raising ideas. As a group we have diverse viewpoints and skill sets from events management, ecological monitoring and surveys, to sitting on committees, journalism, social media advertising and marketing. Together we hope to use these skills collectively with others in the village to enhance our natural spaces biodiversity and make them central to our village going forward. So keep an eye out for our events and awareness campaigns.

**Faces Behind the Fields.** In this edition, we meet one of several people without whom this project would not have been possible, the new owner of Abbey Farm, Michael Watson. He spoke to Angela Young.

*Angela: Could you tell us about the coincidence which recently came to light around the purchase of Abbey Farm from the Rowley family?*

Michael: My great-great grandfather developed the houses originally on West Road in the village, which is where I grew up. And then I found out that he actually bought the land to do it from the Rowley family, which was a bizarre thing to find out as we bought this from the Rowley family.

*Angela: When you used to play here as a child, did you ever imagine that you might own it?*

Michael: I don't think I ever thought I'd own it. Like many people in the village, I often thought - wouldn't it be nice to live there? But in some ways it often looked a bit austere with the red windows, and quite dark in winter. And when you're a kid, you wonder whether it's haunted. So it's not something I ever imagined owning.

*Angela: And what is it like living here?*

Michael: I can describe it as camping at the moment because the house needs complete refurbishment. You name it, it needs to be done. We have done this before as a family in terms of taking on old houses and refurbishing them so we're used to it. I'm not sure it's everyone's cup of tea, living in a house with wallpaper peeling off the walls but it's fine; it will be lovely. You know, as they say, the house has got lovely bones and one day it will be great.

*Angela: And any sign of those aforementioned ghosts?*

Michael: Not at all. From the first night we were here, you think, I wonder? But it's been absolutely silent. All you hear is the animals outside. So no; I wish I could tell you there's a wonderful ghost story that would haunt the village but unfortunately not.

*Angela: How much of a responsibility is it to own such an iconic building for the village with a long history?*

Michael: We feel it as a responsibility. The house had been in the same family since it was built and it is an amazing environment here. Our intention is to keep it the way it is and make it even better. We need to do a lot to bring it up to a good standard as a place to live and a safe place to be because a lot of the trees haven't been looked after for years and they're unsafe, but once we do that, we hope to leave this place in a better state. I feel like a steward, you know; we're lucky to have this place but we won't have it forever. It passes through our hands for a time in history and we'll do our utmost to do the best we can with it in the time that we've got.

*Angela: You mentioned that you might look at ways that the property could perhaps provide an income of some sort. Are you able to say what things that you might consider?*

Michael: The one thing we are sure of is we don't want to do anything here that doesn't build upon the lovely environment. So whatever we do, it has to be something that is going to mean other people can enjoy it, but then we don't want to have so much going on here that it's just busy and noisy. I would probably sound like a madman if I told you all the ideas I have in my head right now!

*Angela: So far you have had a great relationship with those who are trying to preserve the land for the village. How is it going?*

Michael: It's been great. The committee that I've been working with for over a year is a great bunch of people. We had a little celebration here for the group when the purchase went through and it was lovely. I hope that we're working well together and I think the response from everyone in the village has been tremendous. So I'd like to say thank you to them. We've met a number of people who used to walk through here and the vast majority of the interactions we've had with them have been very pleasant and very respectful. That is a great testament to everyone in the village.



## PLANT LIFE FOCUS: THE OLD OAK

by Angela Young with thanks to Helena Perry. It is strangely easy to miss the most majestic and possibly the oldest tree in Croft Close Set Aside. But by taking a minute's diversion from the recently cleared path through the wood to the south of the set aside, you will find what is believed to be one of the oldest oak trees in East Anglia. Oak trees can live up to 1000 years old but are generally mature at 75 and live on average 150-250 years. This magnificent specimen has a circumference of 6m 70cm, which makes it about 500 years old. That means it was an acorn before King Henry VIII was born, approximately 515 years ago. It has survived the plague and the pandemic. It has lived through (in no particular order) 23 monarchs, countless wars including the Crimean and Boer Wars, the Falklands and Gulf Wars, as well as two World Wars (and one World Cup!) It flourished while Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe and while Guy Fawkes plotted, it survived the life and death of William Shakespeare and Charles Darwin and witnessed the UK join and leave the EU.

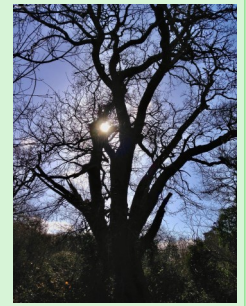


Photo by Guy Richardson

At some point during that time the tree has probably been pollarded. Daphne Fisher explained that this is an ancient form of tree management. Where trees are grown in grazing pastures, the tree's crown was regularly cut at around eight feet high, which would be well above the browsing height of the stock below. This allowed the land to be used for both grazing animals and to provide useful material from the trees. It also meant that the trunk became successively fatter and consequently more stable and able to withstand strong winds. This would have helped it survive so long. Sadly in the last 50 years, the oak has suffered a fair bit of damage – some of it caused deliberately by fire and vandalism, but its blackened and hollowed out centre is testament to its resilience.

Oak trees are host to hundreds of insect species, supplying many birds with an important food source. In autumn, mammals such as squirrels, badgers and deer feed on acorns. The oak tree was sacred to many gods, including Zeus and Jupiter. These gods ruled over thunder and lightning, and oak trees are often hit by lightning as they are the tallest living feature in the landscape. Druids practised rituals in oak groves and the oak also linked with royalty: ancient kings and Roman Emperors wore crowns of oak leaves. These are all reasons to cherish and admire our old oak, and why the action group will be doing all they can to preserve it.

## HISTORY OF THE AREA, by Charlotte with thanks to HIAG.

The full article can be found here: <https://abbeyfields.online/abbey-farm-histon-archaeology>

The Abbey Farm site is as old as the village of Histon itself. A walk through the site provides evidence of life here through the centuries. In fact Gun's Lane is reputed to be part of the medieval road to Ely, known as the King's Highway.

Histon is mentioned in the Domesday book of 1086, and was one of the largest villages in Cambridgeshire with 75 residents, which might give a population of around 300 people as most of the residents counted were probably 'heads of households', although four were 'slaves'! Impington was one third of the size.

The village would have been an attractive place to settle as it had a 15 metre gravel ridge with gently sloping sides. The land dropped down from the ridge to the medieval Fen edge. The Histon Brook possibly dates from Anglo-Saxon times and its deep ditch alongside Park Lane helped to keep the centre of the village dry.

Abbey Farm seems to have been at the centre of one of the two manors of Histon, with its own 13<sup>th</sup> century church of St Etheldreda which gradually disappeared through neglect and demolition; but in the sixteenth century parishioners still requested burial in the churchyard. In the 19th century, human bones were uncovered while running a water main to Abbey Farm. These were reinterred in a pit marked by a grave slab, which is at the foot of a tree near the Abbey Farm driveway.



The centre of the early village was likely to have been around this area. In the 12th to 14th centuries it probably spread to Croft-Close et Aside as confirmed by large amounts of pottery sherds from this time. You can still see evidence of ploughing in the ridge and furrow pattern typical of the time. Left to its own devices, Croft Close Set Aside has re-generated in lines which may be related to the old medieval ridge and furrow – the pattern can be even seen on historical Google Earth images.

The population fell drastically in the late 14th and 15th centuries, as a result of the plague. and other factors. As the population picked up, the village spread eastwards towards the village green. A Jacobean Manor house was built in the south field of Abbey Farm after 1611, and was demolished in the 19th century. The current farmhouse was completed in 1847, and was in the hands of the Rowley family until it was recently sold.



Photo courtesy of Cheffins estate agents

Abbey Fields (Croft Close Set Aside and Long Meadow) seems to have been at the heart of early activity and settlement and we hope it will once again become the site of village recreation and discovery.

## MORE WILDLIFE FOCUS THE GATEKEEPER BUTTERFLY, by Angela Young

Photo courtesy of [Butterfly conservation.org](http://butterflyconservation.org)



For a few months in the summer, you might spot a Gatekeeper butterfly in Croft Close Set Aside as well as other parts of Histon. Also known as the Hedge Brown, the Gatekeeper is named because it is usually found in gateways and along hedgerows.

It is a golden butterfly with distinctive black spot near the wing tip that usually contains two tiny white dots. Male and female Gatekeepers are similar in appearance, but male Gatekeepers have a band of dark scales running diagonally across the forewings. The black spots look like eyes, which helps them defend themselves against predators. Gatekeepers can be found anywhere where tall grasses grow close to hedges, trees, or scrub where there is a good source of nectar. Bramble is a favoured nectar source.

Like many species, the population of Gatekeepers is at risk from the widespread use of pesticides. Gatekeepers have been affected more than most butterflies by the scale of past hedge removal and loss of field edge habitat, especially in the arable areas of eastern England so places like Croft Close Set Aside and Long Meadow provide a refuge. This is significant because, like bees, butterflies are massive pollinators vital for the growth of many plants.

There are things we can do to help such as hay-cutting at the right time, and looking after our hedges and scrub. These are all things that the Site Action Management Group will be taking into consideration in all their decisions on maintenance of the land.

### Contact Us

Website Address: <https://abbeyfields.online/>

Main email address : [hello@abbeyfields.online](mailto:hello@abbeyfields.online)

To register for newsletters, volunteering and/or membership of Friends Group: <https://abbeyfields.online/sign-up>