

NEWS AND STORIES FROM ABBEY FIELDS

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December 2022

As autumn turns towards winter, it is remarkable (again) how late the leaves have stayed on trees - and how warm it has been.

The summer flowers have mainly gone but there is still much to see: Ivy flowers and berries, some fungi (but fewer or perhaps later than last year?) as well as the exotica of lichens and slime moulds which bear careful, close examination. November even saw some new moth records, both adults and moth leaf miners.

In this update

The Abbey Fields fundraising calendar is now available to purchase. East Pond has had a clear out, with some interesting finds being dredged up from the deep in the process. Our little owls bred successfully in the Long Meadow area again this year, giving some interesting sunset views of the family. Path maintenance continued late into the autumn at both Croft Close Set-aside and Long Meadow.



Our homegrown calendar

Our first photography competition attracted a lot of interest and some fine photographs. An independent judging panel selected 13 winners, all featured in the Abbey Fields 2023 calendar.

The winning pictures, together with the runners up, are also posted on our website (<https://abbeyfields.online/photo-comp-intro>). We would like to thank everyone who entered for their efforts, it was wonderful to have so many excellent images to choose from.

We are hoping to run future competitions, which might be aimed at young photographers or be for images taken with mobile phones, or photographs featuring (say) just flora or invertebrates.

If you have ideas on this, please share at hello@abbeyfields.online



Photo by Moira Neal

Treasures from the deep

The Set-aside's East Pond, normally rich in wildlife, dried out completely this summer. This has allowed us to remove invasive sedge from in and around the pond and excavate bed sediment to reduce the nutrient level, so making it more valuable for wildlife as it refills.

The pond – once 15 to 20 m across, as seen in the aerial photo – is now a fraction of its former size, having been infilled with earth, trees and waste.

Our volunteers, supported by Histon & Impington Archaeology Group (HIAG), cut back the sides of the pond to give a more gently sloping bank. This gives more points for wildlife to access the pond and, we think, better replicates the historic bank profile.

The bed yielded up artefacts mainly from the early part of the 20th century. These include a collection of early glass Chivers jars and a tall, elegant but heavy glass bottle dating from the 1920s with 'ESSO LUB' on the side. It seems motor oil was sold this way.



Photo by Arnold Fertig

Maybe in future we will be able to restore the pond to its former dimensions, although we may not be able to do this in one go. It certainly would be too much to do by hand, so we are hoping to secure some grant funding allowing us to engage an earthmoving contractor to do the bulk of the work.

Other finds include fragments of crude red brick perhaps from around the 17th century. The finds give a glimpse of local social history and will be on display at Abbey Fields stalls over the next few months.

A surprise find was part of 13th century St Etheldreda church, the earthworks of which are on nearby Abbey Farm.



Photo by Arnold Fertig

Are you being watched?

A loud, ringing “kiew” call might be the first thing that draws your interest, perhaps on an evening walk. Or it may be the sense of being stared at, and then finding a pair of striking yellow eyes staring hard at you. So what might it be? Chances are you have come across a little owl which, along with tawny owls and occasionally barn owls, frequent Abbey Fields.



Photo by Martin Minarik

Roughly the size of a mistle thrush, but somewhat chunkier, it is Britain’s smallest owl. Its undulating flight is reminiscent of the green woodpecker, but slower and often low above ground, with notably shorter tail. Unlike the similarly coloured but twice as large tawny owl, the little owl is most active at dusk and dawn.

The current British population dates from around 1874 when 40 continental birds were released in Kent. However, fossil evidence shows the species was present in Britain during the Early Pleistocene.

They are now established all the way to the Scottish border, but in recent years their numbers have declined with some attributing this to climate change. Meanwhile, these owls have suffered almost catastrophic declines in parts of continental Europe, with changes in farming practices also seemingly a factor.

Little owls prefer diverse, extensive farmland that offers a combination of old trees and hedges for shelter and nesting cavities, and open grassy areas with bits of bare ground where they can hunt. All this ideally crammed into a relatively small territory.

Perhaps this reminds you of somewhere?



Photo by Guy Richardson

Keeping the paths open

Falling autumnal temperatures dampen the vigour of our bushes and hedges in their quest to grow and grow. For our many volunteers who have spent summer days keeping our pathways open, this may well be a very welcome relief.

At the Set-aside the “path adopters” look after a section of path keeping an eye on when the strands of bramble and shrubs start encroaching too much. A light trim follows.

Meanwhile at Park Lane a small team was out regularly nipping back stems threatening to encroach on the footway / cycle path alongside the Long Meadow hedge. Periodically this hedge will have a major trim to keep it in good shape, but without the valuable input from the team cyclists and walkers will have struggled.

The efforts of all who have contributed, great and small, is much appreciated and valued by the site management team.



Photo by Jon Pavey

Fundraising update

An innovation this year is the Abbey Fields 2023 calendar mentioned above. This is on sale at Topiary Tree (on the edge of The Green), Oakington Garden Centre and online here <https://abbeyfields.online/store> We will also have a stall on The Green in the run up to Christmas, selling the calendar and taking donations. Remember you can still get a Foundation Croft Certificate (for details see here: <https://abbeyfields.online/donate>). Could either be the ideal gift to entice that distant friend or relative to visit the village and catch up with you soon?

In early November we supported the HI Sustainability Group’s “Swish” at the St Andrew’s Centre where many took the opportunity to share and swap good quality clothing – for everyone’s benefit. We very much appreciate the generous donations made in which we shared along with HI Sustainability and Cambridge City Foodbank.

We are very appreciative of the kind donations and support we have recently received from businesses in and around the High Street and on Vision Park. These are making an appreciable contribution to our current fundraising.

Nevertheless, we still have work to do to raise the money to complete purchase of Croft Close Set-aside – our target is to do this in the first quarter of 2023. We are currently pursuing several avenues that might make this happen. But if you can make a contribution, or help in any other way, do not hold back. Details of how you can help or donate are on the website at www.abbeyfields.online.

Summer memories

Oscar Edge, one of our young wildlife enthusiasts, looks back to the summer, sharing his enthusiasm for a popular event at the Set-aside.

“In June 2022, I went to a bird in the hand event at Croft Close in Abbey Fields. The RSPB collected birds in nets to put rings on them, then set them free. The RSPB staff collected the birds and before setting them free they let the audience see the birds up close.

Me and my friends were there: I was so excited to see what was being ringed. Seeing the birds up so close was amazing. When we got to release the birds, I loved being able to touch their soft silky feathers. It was really nice and emotional to see them fly free off into the trees.



Photo by Jon Pavey



Blackcap – photo by Penny Reeves

I saw a variety of birds such as whitethroat, blackbird, young blue tits, dunnock and a blackcap. It was magical to see all these amazing birds up close in Histon.



Dunnock – photo by Penny Reeves



Blue tit – photo by Penny Reeves

Nigel from the RSPB also showed us different bird trackers which was really interesting. He explained that one of the trackers was used on a vulture from India because vultures there have been dying after eating the carcasses of animals that had a drug which was poisoning them. I probably will never see a vulture in Histon...but luckily there is loads more incredible wildlife to see at Abbey Fields!.”

Jays and oaks

Jays are famous for their acorn feeding habits. Individual jays hoard several thousands of acorns, mainly in October, which allows them to live off acorns right through the winter until early summer.

Many of the hoarded acorns germinate and become seedlings so that jays play an important role in the dispersal of acorns and the reproduction of oaks. The spread of young oak trees across the Croft Close Set-aside from a few oaks in the boundary hedges shows the importance of jays in creating what we see today from an abandoned arable field.

The two species, oak and jay, need each other, both benefit from the relationship - this is an example of a symbiotic relationship of which there are many in nature.

You can find out more about jays on our website at www.abbeyfields.online.



Photo by Marilyn Peterkin