

Sadlers Wells Community Woodland

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Newsletter No. 11 – Autumn 2011

End of Term Report

Yes it is that time of year. The Church Tower has been climbed, the clock has been adjusted and once again, an hour has been taken away from our daily lives; suddenly we are facing winter. We still have our memories of summer of course, but this year it will be the hot dry spring that we remember. Those long balmy summer evenings never seemed to happen and when we count how many barbeques we managed, we still have some fingers left on each hand. If we had to do an end of term mark on the season the best we could possibly offer would be “could do better”. From the standpoint of the trees it could hardly have been worse.

Trees have their own preferences about the amount of water that they like around their roots but they all like to have some available when they most need it. Spring this year was characterised by near drought conditions which persisted and persisted and persisted, leaving the ground so dry that even now the ground water has not been fully replenished. Proof, if it were needed, can still be seen in the mere trickle of water that is flowing down the infant River Gowy. Rain there has been, of course, but it came later in the season and it was usually accompanied by high winds which took all the water away before anyone had the chance to get a decent drink and long before it really had chance to soak into the soil.

Wind brings its own problems. Sadlers Wells could well be characterised as an over mature woodland. There is every indication that a lot of the mature trees in the wood started their careers in the period just after the First World War. Contrary to popular belief, trees growing in woods tend to have a shorter life than those growing in the open. Competition for water, food and light ensures that the smaller root growth makes them more likely to suffer from windblow. Sadly, none of our trees is likely to last as long as the pair of open grown Ash that have recently been identified in the Village and which are about two hundred and fifty years old. Nonetheless, our trees are made of pretty stern stuff and it pleasing to be able to report that the wind damage in the older part of the Wood has been relatively

insignificant. Not that this prevents a sense of trepidation each time we visit the wood after yet another blow.

The new wood, with all the disgusting vigour of healthy youth, has stood up to it all. More than that, it now merits the description of "wood" rather than plantation. I am sure that I am not alone in feeling enclosed by the trees during those all too infrequent walks. The different characteristics of the various species of tree are also beginning to become very apparent. Compare the free growth and showy heads of the wild cherry with the staid promise of stability of the pedunculate oaks. The oaks have not made much of an early show but they were planted in groups so they should escape the danger of being shaded out by their more showy, if lightweight, competitors. Oaks do struggle to establish themselves and I have a feeling that this is partially due to the disturbance of transplanting. When we lifted the seedlings ready for transplanting, it was apparent that they were very deep rooted, the taproot being as long as the sapling was high. Inevitably, digging them up meant that they lost a lot of those good roots and this left the young tree with a lot to replace without the benefit of the long root and ready food supply which was left behind in the ground. To add to their problems, the ground where some of them were planted was not necessarily the best. There are patches of running sands on site and oak trees grow long roots, not only to anchor themselves, but also to gather moisture and food. Their feet do not appreciate wet ground.

The main threat to the new wood is its own success. There would have been little point in planting trees small or large in the open ground that is now the Wood. Hoards of rabbits would have descended on them, unable to believe their luck and the trees would have become a welcome addition to their diet. The young plants were planted in plastic sleeves. These not only fend off the unwelcome attention of the rabbits, they also offer protection from the elements and result in better early growth. The theory is that the protectors degrade with exposure to the sun and quietly disappear. Either the sun was not strong enough. or our trees grew too quickly, because they are now outgrowing the guards that threaten to strangle them. Just a little light arboriculture is required from a working party. Not too much of a job; there were only eight hundred trees planted and some of the guards have fallen off already.

Whilst we have been remarkably successful with our planting of new trees, the same cannot be said about our efforts to strengthen the under-storey. We have had two attempts at planting shrubs. The hazel has given a convincing demonstration that the conditions suit and that leaves a question mark about why the population ever fell to such a low level. My feeling is that the culprits are the squirrels, imported from the USA and now dominant. The conventional wisdom is that squirrels take the nuts for food; bury them for storage; subsequently forget

them and effectively plant a new generation of shrubs. This does not seem to me to be something that can be accepted without question. When the squirrel population is high, as it is in the wood, it seems feasible that none of the nuts will ever survive to maturity. If they do and they are planted by the squirrels, then I find it hard to believe that they will survive long in the ground. To a little mouse they must look like a handsome meal but only if they can get there before a much more formidable predator. The badgers leave ample evidence about their activities if you look for the frequent scrapes that are left in the ground. Last year we planted several hundred bluebells. They were “in the green” which is when they have reached the stage of being small bulbs but not yet ready to flower. A few weeks after the planting we saw a collection a very tastefully arranged holes in the ground . I blame the Badgers who have a wonderful sense of smell, but it could just be the squirrels. Hard to tell really because, whoever it was, they did not have the courtesy to leave a thank you note.

During this season the principle disturbers of the quiet and calm have been a much more formidable species. We would hope that all visitors to the wood might respect a facility that is, after all, offered free of charge. There has been sporadic minor vandalism and unwelcome disturbance; not serious but intensely annoying . More upsetting perhaps for the mindset that it represents. We cannot expect our young people (yes the minor damage is mostly by young people) to be angels but we would hope that they would respect other people’s property.

Potentially a much more serious is the systematic removal of timber, presumably for burning. Felled timber has been removed from the Wood in the past but there has now been a case of a tree being cut up with a chain saw. The tree in question was dead but where practicable we try to keep such trees as long as possible . They are an absolutely invaluable wildlife resource and provide habitat for those creatures who are not ground based. From time to time it may be necessary to remove some trees but this is only done when there is a very specific reason. Any removal must be sanctioned by the Trustees and payment made where appropriate. Any timber removed without authority is theft and will be treated as such. If you hear a chain saw in the Wood you can be pretty sure that something is wrong, unless it is a tree surgeon carrying out safety work.

Ernest Croley

Hotel development in the Wood

We were approached in July by Sally Sissons and Elaine Crotty on behalf of the School who wanted to build a bughotel in the Wood to provide a home and shelter for all sorts of bugs, insects and minibeasts which the children can then study and learn about nature. The ‘hotel’ consists of a pile of old pallets forming a

cubic shape which is then stuffed with straw, grass, twigs and various other materials to provide different environments to suit different inhabitants. We look forward with interest to hearing what sort of bugs, insects and other inhabitants they have been able to attract.

The Ash tree

The Ash (Latin name *Fraxinus excelsior*) is a large deciduous tree growing usually to a height of between approximately 50 and 100 feet or 15 to 30 metres, a widespread native and found in many ancient semi-natural woodlands. There are a few specimens in the old part of Sadlers Wells Wood and the ash is one of the species which we put into the new plantation in 2006. Its timber is a pale white and has the benefits of being durable and easily worked. The natural strength of the wood makes it very suitable for the handles of tools such as hammers, spades and pickaxes and for everyday furniture and sporting equipment such as oars, billiard cues and hockey sticks. Ash was used in the manufacture of the wings on Mosquito bombers in the Second World War and more recently by the Morgan Car Company to make the frames for their sports cars. In earlier times it was used for making spear shafts and also bows if yew was unavailable.

It is a tree that is frequently coppiced with young poles cut usually on a ten year rotation, or five yearly for simple bean poles. It then becomes a sustainable resource able to go on producing poles on rotation indefinitely. We may coppice some of the ash in the new plantation as examples of coppicing.

It reproduces by producing ash keys which spread and colonise widely so that some have regarded it almost as a weed like the sycamore.

The ash has featured in the folklore of many countries. In Scandinavian mythology, it was 'Yggdrassil', the tree of life which contained the whole world in its roots and branches. This tree was where the gods held their court and the home of several mythical creatures. A squirrel ran up and down the tree carrying messages between the serpent gnawing at its roots and the eagle living in its canopy. A deer fed on its leaves and from its antlers ran all the great rivers of the world. A goat grazed by the tree and its udders contained not milk but mead for the warriors in the Great Hall of Odin.

In Celtic society, especially Ireland, the ash was a tree regarded in awe and there are apparently a number of instances when people refused to cut Ash even when wood was scarce for fear of having their own homes consumed by fire. The wood was believed to have the power to ward off fairies especially on the Isle of Man and in Gaelic Scotland, children were given the sap of the tree as a medicine and protection against witch craft.

In the Sussex area, the ash was regarded as a tree of magic and children were taught never to pass an ash without wishing it 'good day'. Sick children would be passed naked through a cleft ash to cure them and often the cleft would then be bound together in the expectation that that child would heal as the ash healed.

In some parts particularly Kent, children would be expected to carry a sprig of ash on Ash Wednesday or have their feet stamped on. Health & Safety would not approve these days.

Michael Bourne

Helping the Environment

In the Spring Newsletter, a request was included for volunteers to help look after and promote the wood. No special skills are needed, simply enthusiasm, an interest in the natural environment and a willingness to do something for the Village. The wood does not need much attention but does require some regular maintenance. Only a few hours a year would be involved so that the commitment would not be onerous and several of the jobs could be done at a time to suit. We need two types of volunteer. First, looking after the wood itself would require up to two or three sessions a year of a couple of hours or so each providing fresh air, gentle exercise with something to see for your efforts and a bit of social chat as well. Secondly, we need someone to help with running the Friends of the Wood, arranging working parties and the occasional function.

Ernest and I are not getting any younger and we need some younger people to help with the running of the Trust.

Volunteers would be greatly appreciated. Please contact either Ernest or myself – details at the end of this Newsletter.

Friends of the Wood

The annual subscription is a minimum of £5-00 each and the 2011/12 subscription became due on 1st April. Many thanks to the many who have already paid, particularly those who generously gave more than the basic amount. Early payment of those subscriptions still outstanding would be greatly appreciated and payment can be made either to Ernest Croley or Michael Bourne whose details are given below; cheques should be made payable to Sadlers Wells Community Woodland.

Gift Aid is a valuable source of income and we would appreciate subscriptions being gift aided if you are able to do so and have not already done it. The amount of Gift Aid on a single subscription is only small but the total amount we get each year is significant.

What is a nut and what is not?

This is a question which is not as clear cut as it might appear. A strict botanical definition of a nut is a simple dry fruit with one seed (occasionally two) in which the seed case wall becomes very hard on maturity. Thus, true nuts are those like hazel, beech, pecan and acorns. Peanuts, pine nuts, cashews, brazils, horse chestnuts and pistachios are not nuts in the botanical sense, because they comprise several seeds in a single case.

Peanuts, also called groundnuts, goobers and monkey nuts, are actually a type of pea that grows underground, and several 'nuts' are contained in each pod. They originated from South America but are now widely grown. You will see from this that the health warning on a packet of peanuts ("may contain nuts") is not strictly true.

Drupes are what are commonly known as stone fruit e.g.- apricots, almonds, peaches, plums, cherries, olives etc., They commonly have a seed within a hard husk comprising the stone with a soft fleshy exterior. Walnuts and coconuts are classified as drupes for some technical reasons which are far from obvious to anyone who is not an avid botanist. Sometimes, even the experts disagree on the true designation of what are commonly referred to as nuts

A final thought

"God gives the nuts but he does not crack them"

Franz Kafka

If anyone has any comments or queries regarding this Newsletter or the wood generally, please write or e-mail our Clerk, Michael Bourne. We would appreciate response from members to let us know whether we are heading in the right direction.

As mentioned in a previous newsletter, if you see anything unusual or interesting in the wood, please let us know by telephone or e-mail as we would like to make a record.

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Trustees of the Charity Ernest Croley (Chairman), Michael Bourne (Clerk), Bob Price, Tony Gentil, Eric Lord, Alyson Thacker and Dr Katherine Hutchinson.

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 Friends of Sadlers Wells Wood -- Subscription 2011/12

Name(s) Amount (min. £5 per person)

Cheques should be made payable to Sadlers Wells Community Woodland.