



## Autumn 2009

As I write this on 27 September, we are enjoying a classic and quite prolonged Indian summer – dry with clear skies and beautiful autumn light.

There are still plenty of dragonflies – particularly hawkers and darters - on the wing and berries galore on the hedgerow trees. Red admiral, small tortoiseshell and speckled wood butterflies are still out and about too.

And there is plenty to report from the Langdyke World.

After a long period of planning and form filling we are now waiting to hear back on our application to start work at Torpel Manor. Because the site is such an important heritage monument, we have to have permission from Government to do any work on site, including repairing the fence line. This means we haven't been able to get on with our plans for the site as quickly as we hoped with a result that the field has become quite overgrown. However, we do expect to be able to fence it later this year and start work on a new stable block early next.

Once the fencing is restored we will start grazing the field with our Hebridean Sheep. Our plans for the stable block include a small classroom and exhibition with kitchen and toilet facilities so that schools can visit. We are also working with the local Scout troop so that they can use and enjoy the site.

Our reserve at Etton-Maxey Pits continues to evolve with the planted areas growing well and reed beginning to spread across the lower areas. But breeding success on the site – particularly amongst the tern colony - seems to have been considerably lower than last year – perhaps as a result of mink – there have been several sightings of this 'alien invader' there this year.

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We held an evening walk at Etton – Maxey on 10 July as part of the John Clare Festival, attracting over 60 visitors on a beautiful, still summer evening. The visitors were rewarded with great views of barn owl and brown hare as well as many dragonflies and flowers.

Some of you may have seen that Langdyke made the news in August with the report of a nightingale ringed at our Bainton Heath Reserve and re-trapped on the south-west coast of France. Amazingly this is only the tenth time a nightingale ringed in this country has been re-trapped abroad and, even more incredibly, no-one actually knows in which bit of Africa these wonderful songsters winter! Despite all the advances of science, there is still an awful lot we don't know about the natural world.

And our reserves turned up another unusual sight of nature in the summer – a very rare longhorn beetle, which has only once before been found in the whole of East Anglia – and that was in 1948 at Wicken Fen. What is it doing at Swaddywell, you have to ask! I am trying to find a photo so we can put it on the Blog!

We have had a busy summer of events too. Not only did we do two well attended walks on the Friday of the John Clare Festival, but we also 'headlined' on the Saturday as well, delivering a court room drama, 'Who Hung the Moles' to an audience of over 130 people. Our chairman put the case for the prosecution, whilst I gallantly defended the accused, the Enclosure Act, against the charge that it had wilfully and with malice aforethought did destroy the countryside and its social fabric! Sadly despite the weight of evidence, the audience voted with their Clared hearts, not their scientific heads and found Enclosure guilty by 67 votes to 63!

For those who missed the occasion we will be delivering a repeat performance on 17 March in St Botolph's Church, Helpston. Come along and vote for me!

A much less enjoyable event was our attendance at National Farm Open Day on Sunday 6 June – suffice it say it rained all day and whilst the rain poured, we only got a trickle of visitors and returned home very damp indeed. Still this is a great event at Willow Brook Farm and we will be back next year, hoping for sun so that we can do some pond-dipping and sweep netting in summer weather.

Swaddywell also hosted a successful visit by the Chernobyl Children in this period.

And most importantly we do need to say goodbye in this newsletter to our long-serving and dedicated membership secretary, Jennifer Britton. Jennifer is a huge nature enthusiast and will be greatly missed. A huge thank you for all her hard work – and not just for the Trust, but across so many local organisations. David Cowcill from Glinton has kindly taken over as membership secretary.

We also welcome Damian Roberts from Maxey to the Trust committee. Damian will be helping us to better engage with the community in Maxey and to encourage enjoyment of the reserve at Etton-Maxey Pits.

### **The Natural World**

I thought it might be more interesting to use this column to point out some of the things to watch out for in the coming month rather than to report on what has been seen and heard in the recent past. You can find regular updates anyway on the Langdyke Blog (<http://langdykeworld.blogspot.com/>) which I would really encourage you to look at and indeed add reports too so that it becomes a village wide record of what we are all seeing and enjoying in the natural world.

So what should you be looking out for at this time of year?

Most obviously we will be getting our very last views of the departing summer migrants in the next week or two. A few house martins will linger on until mid October, but the swallows are already pretty much gone south and our warblers left some time ago. On the other hand the winter migrants are already just starting to trickle in from Scandinavia and central Europe. Listen out at night for the very thin 'seep' call of the redwing as it flights over on its nocturnal migration. And soon we should hear too the strange chuckle of that other winter thrush, the fieldfare – a rather motley coloured bird with a distinctive flight – rather as if it is about to fall out of the sky!

Equally have you ever thought about searching for galls? Neither had I until this year.

Galls are basically unnatural growths that can be found on trees and plants and are caused by insects that lay their eggs inside the plant tissue. As the larvae hatch and begin to grow the galls develop. The larvae will feed on the tissue inside the gall and if a plant is severely infested it will be weakened and possibly die. This picture is, I think (as I don't know much about this) a type of oak spangle gall, caused by a tiny gall wasp. Look out as well for oak marble gall – a growth the size of an acorn, but clearly different, round and smooth and home to another gall wasp. You can find similar galls leaving marks and patterns on many plants and leaves.



*Oak Spangle Gall*

Finally two other things to keep an ear and an eye out for. Tawny owls are very vocal at the moment as they establish their winter territories. You can hear them calling from all the local woods. The wonders of modern science means that you listen to the call of the tawny by going to [www.botolphsbarn.org.uk](http://www.botolphsbarn.org.uk) and click on the link on the home page (just click on the link above!).

And finally it is time to go out and find the fungi! But to find out more about our local mushrooms and toadstools, don't read this, but instead come on our 1 November walk!

### **Weather Report by Peter Holt**

Spring was generally a good one weather wise with April being significantly milder than usual while May little warmer than average. There were no air frosts in our area after March but we had to wait until the latter part of May before temperatures over 20°C were recorded. Following a dry March, the three spring months were dry with only half the normal rainfall.

Daytime temperatures for June, July and August were near average but the night-time

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temperatures were a little higher than usual. The warmest weather was experienced at the end of June, beginning of July when temperatures on two days just reached 30°C. and on 1<sup>st</sup> July, the minimum temperature did not fall below 18°C. However a large part of July and the beginning of August was the wettest part of the year to-date with July being 35% wetter than usual (right in the middle of the summer holiday period). August also will be remembered for some unusually breezy weather at times.

Following a long period of mainly westerly winds giving very heavy rainfall in the north and west of Britain, the pressure patterns changed at the beginning of September with persistent high pressure becoming established giving very dry conditions in our area. There was no measurable rainfall at Helpston from the 2<sup>nd</sup> September to the end of the month.

Actual rainfall figures recorded at Helpston (in millimetres) for the past months were:-

April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
22.5	25.5	51.0	71.0	50.5	15.0

Long term avg.

47.6	53.2	50.9	52.6	56.1	51.6
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Our area did not have the good summer some had forecast but it was better than the previous two and the good spring followed by dry sunny weather in September has given reasonable conditions overall.

## Focus on - The Bullfinch

I guess it is a subjective judgment but the male bullfinch with his bright red front and white rump must be one of the most stunning of our local birds.

I was very interested to see that the bullfinch has been down-graded in terms of its population status from a red-listed bird (highest conservation concern) to an amber (unfavourable conservation status) bird. This positive change reflects my own very unscientific observation that there seem to be more of them around than in previous years, with birds regularly heard in Royce Wood and as ever very common at the Hanglands. You do hear bullfinches much more often than you see them – a very distinctive thin whistle is the sound to listen for – and they can be surprisingly inconspicuous given the bright colours of the

male.

I asked Chris Hughes, who rings for the BTO at our Bainton Heath reserve if this perceived increase was in line with his own findings and he produced the following data about the number of bullfinch ringed on the reserve since 2003.

2003	-	44
2004	-	54
2005	-	28
2006	-	56
2007	-	52
2008	-	31
2009	-	40

Which suggests a fairly stable population, with an interesting dip on a three year cycle. Chris will continue ringing in autumn and expects the annual count this year to be over 50.

It doesn't though indicate any particular increase in population, although I would stick by my own observation that they do seem to be around in good numbers this year.

Historically bullfinch numbers have declined considerably in recent years, so it is good that they appear to be doing well. In the past the bird was so common that it was an official pest species, with a notorious reputation for eating the buds of fruit trees.

It also traditionally has a reputation as a caged song-bird. Birds were trapped and taught to whistle in tune with a special bird flute. As a result of their readiness to comply with this training, the word bullfinch was historically slang for a fool or simpleton!

## Contacts

*Newsletter and walks*

Richard Astle 01733 252376

*Membership*

David Cowcill 01733 252655



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