

Friends of Midsummer Common Newsletter

Spring Edition, 2021



Friends of Midsummer Common (FoMC) is a group who are concerned with the use and good management of this ancient grassland.

Nature on the Common

Grassland

In May, the buttercups will flower on the Common, and migrant birds return, with House Martins and Swifts again over the grassland. I make a point of visiting the Common's community orchard to listen for the scratchy song of the Whitethroat in the bramble patch on the bank of the allotments. If you're lucky, the male will rise in a jerky song flight or harshly scold you from the undergrowth. The Whitethroat returns from just south of the Sahara to nest in our hedgerows and bramble patches.

The Whitethroat loves stands of mature bramble, often maligned by gardeners and conservationists as it has a habit of taking over allotments or rarer grassland habitats. However, bramble in full sunshine can be one of the best plants for biodiversity. So, our current practice is to simply cut it back at the edges in the winter to prevent its spread and occasionally to flail sections to encourage new growth. The result is more productive flowering and fruits for wildlife and people alike.

Guy Belcher, Biodiversity Officer, Cambridge City Council



Whitethroat (RSPB)



Bramble – the birds love it.

Trees

Do non-native trees have a place on Midsummer Common?

Over the millennia invading nations and returning colonialists brought in many non-native trees that are now common in the UK. The Romans imported the sweet chestnut tree. In the 16th century, the horse chestnut tree, found on the Common's Victoria Ave border, arrived from Turkey. The majestic plane trees on Jesus Green also have their origin outside the UK.

Today, our city arborists are carefully diversifying the city's tree stock to safeguard against the increased risk of a devastating loss of one or more tree species due to pests, diseases or change in climate. To aid in diversification, a city arboricultural officer will, on occasion, carefully select established but non-native trees that are:

- more drought tolerant than many local varieties.
- superior carbon eaters (Cambridge has a low percentage of high carbon-eating conifer trees compared to other cities.)
- better adapted to absorbing urban heat sources.
- resistant to new pathogens.
- more pollution tolerant e.g., the plane trees of Jesus Green.

With the advantages of diversification in mind, city arborists are considering planting one to three dawn redwoods on the Common. In the UK, these grow to about 30m after approximately 70 years. Dawn redwoods are not invasive, and do not pose a threat to native species. These grand trees are beautiful, are an excellent sink for carbon, and help increase the tree canopy to combat climate change. For a preview, stands of these redwoods are on display at the Botanical gardens, Cherry Hinton Hall Park and throughout the UK.

Kenny McGregor, Arboricultural Officer, Cambridge City Council



Dawn redwood –
Cherry Hinton Hall



Dawn redwood –
Autumn, Cambridge
Botanic Garden



Wild in Art plans to install Forty large cow sculptures around Cambridge



Orchard volunteer appropriately proud of a new raised herb bed.



It is a beautiful time of year to visit the orchard.



The orchard is located just to the south of the Cutter Ferry foot bridge.

Cows on the Common:

The centuries-old tradition of cattle roaming the Common was recently put in jeopardy when the City Council proposed budget cuts (of 8k!) to the 'out of hours' Pinder service. A furore ensued, which even reached national levels, when one of our concerned FoMC members wrote a letter printed by *Country Life!* Fortunately, a change of heart by the Council led to the recognition of these ancient grazing rights and their contribution to biodiversity. So, we can all look forward to another summer of sharing the Common with the cows again! And, speaking of cows . . . we hear that 40 Art Cows are proposed to "graze" throughout Cambridge in Spring 2021 with one of these designated for the Common. We gather they've been commissioned and created by 'Wild in Art', inspired by the Red Poll cattle we see on the Common.

News from the Orchard:

The FoMC is happy to announce that Kit Holland is taking on some of the orchard management responsibilities, although happily, Dick Baxter is still providing guidance and help. So, here is the orchard update from Kit:

Spring is sprung! Over the last year, our local green spaces have become more precious than ever, and it's wonderful to see the orchard coming back to life. The apricots, daffodils, and primroses are blooming, and our bees are out and about foraging. Between the sound of visitors enjoying the space and the smell of grass new-mown by our volunteers, it really does give a sense of renewal and optimism. Over the winter, we've avoided large gatherings. However, from April we plan to meet in groups to volunteer. Those who've been in the orchard recently will notice a large wooden box near the espaliered pears, which will be a raised bed for herbs just as soon as we get soil from the council. The accompanying picture shows both this author and an extremely professional artist's impression of the project.

Volunteer Opportunity: If all is well regarding covid restrictions, we will meet to plant the bed on Sunday, the 25th of April, from 2 pm to coincide with Sustain's Good to Grow Day (formerly the Big Dig). New volunteers are encouraged to attend, all ages and abilities welcome, and no experience is necessary. Of course, there are many other things planned and going on in the orchard – in fact, too many to list here. If you want to know more, then drop us an email, or, even better, come in person and give us a hand on the 25th.
Kit Holland, Orchard Manager

Open Issues for the FoMC

FoMC Management Plan

A draft Management Plan for 2019/2024 has been submitted to the Council, and we are awaiting their agreement.

Cycling through the Common

We have raised a number of issues with the Council, including the use of electric bikes and scooters, with a view to making the Common a safer place to walk

New Friends of Midsummer Common website – Stay tuned!

Opportunities to Volunteer

(All activities are pending compliance with Covid guidelines for volunteer groups) See Kit's note above: Sunday, April 25th, 2 pm bed planting at the orchard.

Recurring Dates:

April – summer each Sunday from 10:00–12:00 am; Orchard Tending
Please direct any questions to Kit Holland: Orchard_Manager@protonmail.com

Please Join the Friends of Midsummer Common

Members receive our newsletter via-email and are immediately informed of any new developments on the Common.