

# *Lockdown Diaries*



*April 2020 -  
March 2021*

*"No one would have believed in the early weeks of the twentieth year of the twenty first Century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water." After War of the Worlds, H. G. Wells 1897*

*Pat Doody, Brampton,  
April 2021*

## 24<sup>th</sup> March

- By now (the first day of lockdown) most of the early plants were flowering. These included Red Dead-nettle, Wood Anemone, Coltsfoot and Early Dog-violet.
- Chiffchaffs had arrived, closely followed in early April by Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Willow Warbler and on the 8<sup>th</sup>, April, my first Swallow. As they say “one Swallow does not make a summer”, and so it turned out.
- Although I have lived in Brampton for over 30 years ‘shielding’ has given me the opportunity to follow up the Brampton Biodiversity Survey carried out between 2013 & 2014.
- This ‘lockdown’ has also provided the stimulus to collate the vast amount of information (photographs and documentation) collected about the Parish. Some of this is summarised in this diary.





## 6<sup>th</sup> April

- Time to take an early morning walk to Portholme to see how the Fritillaries are faring. Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Corn Buntings accompany me as I approach the main colony.
- Too early in the year for flowering, so I return home via Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. The walk along Alconbury Brook, which marks much of the northern boundary of the Parish is always rewarding (apart from the noise of the A14).
- Especially good for Dragonflies and Damselflies, but that will have to wait until a little later in the year. In the meantime, the display of Cowslips on the bank overlooking the entrance to the Racecourse at Brampton is always well worth a photograph.

# 9<sup>th</sup> April



- Work on the new A1/A14 'superhighway' is near completion, creating 12 lanes running from the south to northwest of the village.
- Brampton Wood is the aim of the walk today. My route passes through gravel excavations and over the new roads. The numerous yellow-jackets of archaeologists digging holes everywhere in 2016 have now gone. They unearthed numerous Bronze, Iron-Age and Roman artifacts and a 'lost' Medieval village built on an earlier Anglo-Saxon community. Interestingly it was called Houghton in early documents.
- I am more interested in the Little-ringed Plover and Ringed Plover, which with Lapwing look as though they might nest on the excavated bare gravel floor. This is probably the first time these species have bred in the Parish.
- Unfortunately, the wood is closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Bluebells can be seen flowering but are inaccessible.

# 12<sup>th</sup> April - Easter Sunday



- Another walk to the gravel pits near the village. Little-ringed and Ringed Plover, Lapwing all confirmed nesting. Sand Martins, have arrived no doubt prospecting for nesting sites in a gravel bank left in the pit. The boulder clay 'uplands' west of the village are a good place to see Yellowhammers, a typical bird of hedgerows in open agricultural land.
- The new A1/A14 is now open. Let the landscaping begin.
- Greenfinches appear on the bird feeders in the garden, a rare sight these days. Apparently suffering from a parasitic organism called *Trichomonas gallinae*, their population has declined dramatically in recent years. Regular cleaning and moving feeders can help combat this disease.
- The warm weather has also brought out Holly Blue, a bee fly and in the early evening the first bats, probably Pipistrelle and Brown Long-eared.



## 16<sup>th</sup> April

- Back to Portholme where the Fritillaries are in full flower. What a fantastic sight, the only meadow where the species occurs in Cambridgeshire. Other plants include Meadow Saxifrage an increasingly rare plant as these riverside flood plain meadows are sprayed with herbicides and treated with artificial fertilisers.
- The flat alluvial meadow became a mecca for early flyers, with some taking to the air by 1910 only one year after Bleriot's flight across the Channel. Used by the Royal Flying Corps between 1914 and 1918, aircraft were built on site for a short while. Remnants of wartime use are present near the caravan park in Bromholme Lane. Passing the park there are two concrete balloon tethering structures, which are painted white now. When the photograph was taken a couple of years ago, one still had some of its original paint.



# 25<sup>th</sup> April



- The River Great Ouse serves as the southern boundary of the Parish. The walk from River Lane follows a former tow path, along which at one time boats could travel from the Wash as far inland as Bedford, a distance of more than 60km.
- Sedge Warbler and Reed Warbler are newly arrived summer visitors, nesting along its margins. Typical riverside plants include Purple Loosestrife, Meadowsweet, Common Reed and Gipsywort.
- Always a pleasant walk it takes you to the Brampton Mill restaurant and pub. Unfortunately closed now.



# 30<sup>th</sup> April



- One of my favourite walks from the village is to Hinchbrooke Country Park via the entrance to the racecourse. Crossing Alconbury Brook I often see Grey wagtail and Little Egret. Under the bridge on this occasion there were fresh Otter tracks, although I have yet to see the animal.
- The brook floods from time to time affecting the racecourse, surrounding fields and access roads.



# *Lockdown Diary May*



*"Morning in May:*

*The busy lark, a messenger of daye,  
Salueth in hire song the morwe graye....*

*May, with alle thy floures and thy  
greene, welcome be thou, wel faire fressche  
May, I hope that I som greene gete  
may."*

*Extracts from Chaucer Canterbury  
Pilgrims: The Knights Tale.*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> May



- A busy day with an early morning walk to Hinchbrooke Country Park. Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler and Common Tern amongst the migrants. The last species nesting on a pontoon in one of the lakes in the park. It arrives from the coasts of west and south Africa, a considerable journey although not as far as the Arctic Tern, which migrates between the Antarctic and the Arctic each year.
- Later in the day, a walk to Brampton Wood, revealed Red Campion, a relatively uncommon plant in Huntingdonshire, growing by one of the tracks leading to the wood. Jack-by-the-hedge, also known as Garlic Mustard can be extremely plentiful and not only smells of garlic but tastes like it too.
- Back to the garden 'lockdown' in the afternoon. Unseasonably warm so a BarBQ is in order. For the first time since moving to Brampton some 30 years ago, I heard a Cuckoo from the garden. Is it just me or are there far more Wood Pigeons on our bird feeders? Probably not surprising as the BTO web site tells me there are 5.2 million pairs in summer, augmented with large numbers of winter visitors.



## 5<sup>th</sup> May

- Green-winged orchid a surprise find in Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, probably seeds carried on someone's boots from the large colony on nearby Brampton Racecourse. There can be thousands of flowering spikes there in May.
- More time in the garden. This Zebra Spider, a common species of jumping spider, was a new species for me. Note the large eyes, which help it locate prey.
- Another surprise, this time from Portholme Meadow, Early Long-horn moth *Adela cuprella* on Sulphurwort. A locally distributed species in Huntingdonshire with only one other record in Brampton Parish. This is a female; males of the genus have antennae that can be 5 times their body length.

# 8<sup>th</sup> May



- VE Day festooned with bunting the village celebrates. Decided to take a longer walk today, beginning by crossing the bridge over what used to be the A14 north of the village. Oxeye Daisy provides a welcome display along the road verge.
- The walk along Alconbury Brook to Hinchingsbrooke Country Park did not disappoint with a Hairy Dragonfly on the stream bank and a bank vole in the park. Two strangely shaped birds flying over, turned out to be Glossy Ibis. First recorded in 2007 it is one of several species, which are extending their range northwards as the climate warms.
- Wetland grassland in the park supported a spectacular display of Ragged Robin. Once common in wet meadows of the river valleys, it is another species now relatively local in Huntingdonshire.
- On to Brampton Mill pub and restaurant, closed now for nearly 6 weeks, so no chance of a beer. However, I was treated to views of two Hobby hunting insects, including dragonflies.

# 10<sup>th</sup> May



- The weather has turned a little colder, but bright and breezy. Hinchingsbrooke has most of the more common summer visitors, many of them singing despite the cold.
- I can hear a Cuckoo calling from some way away. However, it is not long before it appears flying towards me. Calling again it flies close by and settles on a tree in a friend's paddock. Great views and the second bird in the parish – or is it? When searching for a mate males can travel some distance so individuals may be recorded more than once.
- Hinchingsbrooke again provides plenty of opportunities for photographing Dragonflies and Damselflies, such as the Large Red Damselfly a relatively early flying species.
- Swallows and Sand Martins about but in small numbers, no sign yet of any Swifts.
- Over the last few years birds of prey have become more common and it is not unusual to see Red Kite and Common Buzzard in the Parish .

# 14<sup>th</sup> May



- Surviving farmland west of the new A1/A14 is good for Yellowhammers. Little-ringed and Ringed Plover, continue to be present on the gravel floor of the borrow pit.
- Gravel extraction has exposed two or maybe three gravel terraces, deposited during previous glacial periods stretching back 450,000 years. Sand Martins, have found the bank suitable for excavating nesting burrows. At the maximum there were some 80 holes.
- Further perambulations were curtailed by a request from NatureScot (Scottish Natural Heritage) to join a small independent group tasked with advising on the removal of Site of Special Scientific Interest status from part of a sand dune near Aberdeen. Turned into yet another golf links course, Donald Trump's representatives opposed the proposal claiming they had 'improved' its nature conservation value. Despite being a semi-retired coastal ecologist, how could I refuse. The section of the site, lost its statutory protection this December.
- When not working on this, I was still able to get out and hear further evidence of Cuckoos near the Mill and in Brampton Wood. Finally, on the 14<sup>th</sup>, a Swift flew over my house.

# 20<sup>th</sup> May



- An early morning encounter with a Roe Deer near the entrance to the Racecourse was a bit of a surprise. One of only two deer truly native to Britain (the other is the Red Deer). It has been hunted by humans, at least since the Mesolithic.
- Closer examination of a photograph of Cuckoo Flower taken in Hinchingsbrooke Country Park revealed a small moth (top right in the picture). This turned out to be Small Metal-mark (*Prochoreutis myllerana*) and only the second record in Huntingdonshire. Thanks to Barry Dickerson for the identification, despite the poor quality of the picture.
- Damselflies, such as the Banded Demoiselle, provided numerous photographic opportunities both in the Country Park and along the River Great Ouse.



# 27<sup>th</sup> May



- Towards the end of May warm and dry, and lengthening days, mean walks are later in the afternoon. Portholme is starting to look at its best or as it was described by William Camden in 1607 “.. whereof in the springtime this may be truly said”:

*“The pleasant Spring faire floures doth yeeld,  
Of divers colours, in this field.”*

- It is also now that nesting by Corn Buntings (at least 10 singing males) , Meadow Pipits and Skylarks is at its most prolific.
- Returning home, the anxious alarm call of the Oystercatcher accompanies me along Bromholme Lane, an ancient trackway to Portholme to and from Brampton. Pepys in his diary entry for the 13<sup>th</sup> October 1662 describes “... a melancholy walk to Portholme, seeing the country-maids milking their cows there, they being there now at grass ... they come all home together in pomp with their milk, .. and have musique before them.”





# *Lockdown Diary June*

*"Now summer is in flower and nature's  
hum*

*Is never silent round her sultry bloom  
Insects as small as dust are never done  
Wi' glittering dance and reeling in the  
sun*

*And green wood fly and blossom haunting  
bee*

*Are never weary of their melody..."*

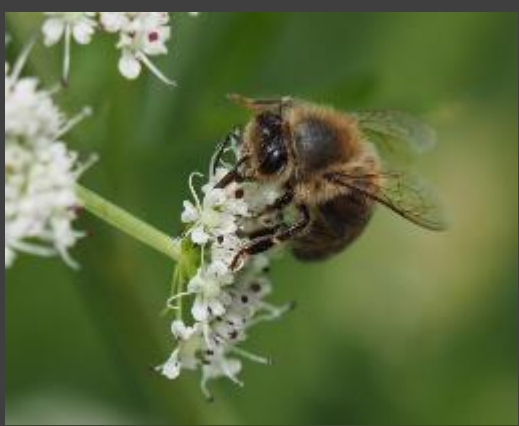
*Extract from John Clare (1793-1864),*

*'The Shepherd's Calendar: June'*

# 1<sup>st</sup> June

- To celebrate the 1<sup>st</sup> of June an afternoon walk was called for. Anti-clockwise from Green Lane through Brampton Park, used by the RAF since the 1940s. Home to the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC) from 1953 to 2013.
- On to River Lane and a disused gravel pit, excavated in the early 1940s to provide ballast for nearby airfields. Up until recently it supported a nesting colony of Grey Heron and Little Egret, the latter a recent colonist to Britain as the climate has warmed.
- And then to Brampton Mill, alas still closed due to Covid-19. In Medieval Times, people farmed in an open strip cultivation field system. The method of ploughing by cattle and later horses, left a distinctive imprint on the landscape, in the form of ridge and furrow undulations. But in 1348 the 'Black Death' arrived in Britain. Killing up to 40% of the population in just over a year, there were fewer and fewer people to cultivate these fields. Many were abandoned and left fallow or grazed by cattle and/or sheep. A legacy from this previous pandemic is written in our meadows. An RAF photograph from the 1940s shows the extent of this grassland in the vicinity of the Mill, especially either side of Bromholme Lane.





## 4<sup>th</sup> June

- After a pleasant spring, the weather has turned dull and cold. Despite this - exercise, and an early evening walk to Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. A Cuckoo still calling.
- The Park does not disappoint and there are plenty of opportunities to photograph dragonflies, including Scarce Chaser, which appears to be expanding its range northwards, as is the Ivy Bee, which only arrived in Britain in 2001. Four-spot Chaser and Large Red Damselfly are again showing well.
- Moving into the summer months, more and more marginal wetland plants appear around the lakes, including Marsh Woundwort.
- Purchased by Cambridge County Council in the early 1960s Hinchingsbrooke Park was formally opened in 1989. Thirty years on and it has a wealth of wildlife. Carefully managed, a variety of habitats include lakes (from gravel extraction), woodland and grassland.

# 8<sup>th</sup> June

- Lockdown restrictions are beginning to ease. However, still being cautious and remaining in Brampton Parish. It seemed appropriate to check upon a colony of Bee Orchids, first discovered in June 2007.
- The site was part of a new bridge built over the A1, which was realigned more than 20 years ago. The imported material probably had orchid seeds in it, and in the following years, flowering spikes increased in number and distribution along the road verge.
- Building the new A1/A14 would destroy the extended colony. However, following discussion with the ecologist for the scheme, the original site was roped off and declared a 'Protected Nature Conservation Area'.
- So, a walk along Brampton Road to the site was called for to see what had survived. The answer was nothing of interest. Firstly, road realignment and a variety of obstacles had destroyed parts of the 'protected' grassland. Secondly, the final 'landscaping' works ruined the rest. Today the site is nothing but a weedy patch of ruderal species such as Wormwood, and Creeping Thistles.



# 16<sup>th</sup> June



- Still very few swallows and martins. When we moved to Brampton more than 30 years ago, there would regularly be 30-40 Swifts flying round. The most so far this year is three. The RSPB report a decline of 53% between 1995 and 2016. House Martins and Swallows are also depleted in numbers by 40% and 58% respectively between 1995 and 2018, according to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).
- Walking through Hinchbrooke, if the number of singing males is anything to go by, some populations of warblers and other summer migrant passerines are healthy. BTO data shows Blackcaps and Chiffchaff have increased significantly. Others, including Whitethroat, Garden Warbler, Sedge Warbler and Reed Warbler appear relatively stable.
- However, Willow Warbler and Spotted Flycatchers show significant declines. This last species is now only occasionally seen along River Lane and in the willows along the Great Ouse. It has nested in a few gardens nearby but not in the last 25 years.
- In keeping, I guess with many others, clearing out those books and other 'stuff' which have been accumulating dust, provides a distraction from the virus.

# 21<sup>st</sup> June



- The longest day, doesn't time fly by? The birds taking advantage of the gravel pits associated with extraction for the new road continue to be a draw. Exposed gravel surfaces provide suitable nesting for Ringed Plover, although they appear to have been disturbed, and we cannot confirm successful breeding. Green Sandpiper, an early passage migrant, also appear. A highlight was a juvenile Peregrine Falcon.
- At this time in June, Yellowhammers are prominent in the hedgerows, where the male voices its 'little bit of bread and no cheese' song. Insects make up the bulk of its food in summer, flocking to arable fields to feed on seeds in winter.
- A change of habitat. The track around the borrow pit follows the boundary between the now excavated glacial outwash gravels, and Anglian Glaciation boulder clay. Reaching a bridleway and walking westwards over rising ground, the path leads to Brampton Wood. Open once again and although lacking spring flowers there is plenty to see. Black-hairstreak is one of the site specialties at this time of year. People travel for miles to see and photograph it.



## 24<sup>th</sup> June

- Heading for Brampton Mill along the Great Ouse it is easy to continue taking photographs, if only to aid identification. Even some of the visually less exciting and ubiquitous species such as the umbellifer, Hedge Parsley, may be worth it.
- Anticlockwise for a change and on to the entrance to Hinchbrooke Country Park. For their size Common Blue Damselflies are voracious predators.
- A hot day, I am accompanied by a Red Kite on my walk through the park. More than 30 years ago, when a member of the Nature Conservancy Council Chief Scientist Team, we debated if their reintroduction was desirable or feasible. A common sight now having expanded from the few surviving pairs in Wales and many more introduced from Spain, there are now in excess of 1,800 pairs in England.

# 27<sup>th</sup> June



- It is always worthwhile walking towards the Racecourse. Yellow feet, black legs and black bill distinguish the Little Egret from its cousin the Great White Egret. Both species immigrants from the Continent in recent years. This bird is often found searching the shallows around the river gauge on Alconbury Brook. It has become relatively tolerant of my presence.
- The bank above the river to the west, is the site of what is thought to be a Neolithic Cursus and burial site. Crop marks, visible on Google Earth, mark the site of an Iron Age settlement.
- Immediately adjacent to the river a small hay meadow has remnants of Medieval ridge and furrow grassland, retaining some typical meadow herbs, such as Ladies Bedstraw.
- Walking towards the Country Park, Alconbury Brook provides habitat for one of the most numerous damselflies, the Banded Demoiselle, here a female.







# *Lockdown Diary July*

*"Daughter of pastoral smells and sights  
And sultry days and dewy nights  
July resumes her yearly place  
Wi her milking maiden face  
Ruddy and taud yet sweet to view  
When everywhere's a vale of dew  
And raps it round her looks that smiles  
A loubly rest to daily toils  
Wi last months closing scenes and dins  
Her sultry beaming birth begins"*

*Extract from John Clare (1793-1864).*

*'The Shepherd's Calendar: July'*

# 1<sup>st</sup> July



- Up to the end of June I estimate I have walked some 250km around Brampton Parish.
- It is difficult to find new paths after three months of lockdown, but even those that are well trodden, such as in Hinchbrook Park reveal photographic opportunities. Here a couple of Small Skipper butterflies feeding on Creeping Thistle.
- Continuing the butterfly theme, walking through the Park, a Gatekeeper feeding on Marsh Thistle and another small butterfly, the Brown Argus on Field Scabious.
- From here walk to the Brampton Mill . Good news, I meet the manager and he informs me they open again on the 4<sup>th</sup> July.

# 4<sup>th</sup> July



- An auspicious day in the USA, even more important in Brampton. As promised, after 3 months of lockdown the Brampton Mill is open again, although you must have a meal, wear a mask and be socially distanced. Decided to leave it for a few days to let the rush die down.
- The day was not very bright, and cold for the time of year. This ushered in several days with unusually cold damp weather.
- Despite this, a walk around the gravel extraction lakes (called Borrow Pit 1 on the A1/A14 plans) west of the new road, resulted in a good selection of common water birds: 30 or so Tufted Duck, Great-crested Grebe, Cormorant, Black-headed Gull and several Common Tern and Pied Wagtails.
- There was plenty of activity from the large number of Sand Martins, inhabiting the sand/gravel bank left by the excavation.

# 12<sup>th</sup> July



- Hoverflies are colourful and varied, often mimicking bees and wasps.
- Although photographs are an aid to identification, for many of the 283 species in the British Isles, this can be a bit tricky. A hand lens or a microscope are often needed to separate closely related species.
- This year there were few species seen regularly in and around the garden. However, a trip to Hinchingsbrooke Country Park provided plenty of opportunities to photograph some of the commoner species.
- Most hoverflies do not have English names. Those shown here going anticlockwise from the top are:

*Volucella zonaria* (a hornet mimic), *Didea fasciata* (accompanied by a small beetle), *Episyrphus balteatus* the Marmalade Hoverfly (the larvae feed on aphids) and *Helophilus pendulus*, sometimes called The Footballer because of its stripes.

For a good identification guide see Britain's Hoverflies by Stuart Ball and Roger Morris 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2015, published by WildGuides.



# 19<sup>th</sup> July



- A few years after I arrived in Brampton in 1984, work on a new link road between the A1 and the M1 started. A walk to the racecourse, crosses an embankment built as part the road bridge and roundabout over the new road (formerly the A604).
- The bank itself was built with a combination of blue Oxford Clay and chalky boulder clay probably from the time of the Anglian Glaciation 450,000 years ago. The soil appears to have had seed of several plants typical of calcareous grassland including Quacking Grass (picture with mating Tiger Craneflies), Salad Burnet and Bee Orchid, the last species scattered on banks overlooking the road leading to the racecourse.
- In 2013 a visit to the bank as part of the Brampton Biodiversity Project found a picture-winged fly called *Acinia corniculata* or Knapweed Fly because the larva feed on Common Knapweed (Hardheads). This was thought to be a new record for Huntingdonshire Vice County. The site included other insects of herb-rich grassland such as 6-spot Burnet moth. One of several day-flying moths, this species occurs in thousands on nearby Brampton Racecourse SSSI.

# 23<sup>rd</sup> July



- Power outage, which destroyed my computer hard drive. Fortunately, all the files were backed up, but it took a long time to reinstall everything.
- Now that we can travel further afield it seemed like a good time to check on a road verge outside the Parish near Easton, off the A14 (west). This is one of only four sites in Huntingdonshire with Crested Cow-wheat. Happily, the County Council road verge management maintains suitable conditions for the survival of the plant at this site. Two other road verge sites appear to have lost this species.
- On the way back called into the Black Bull where drinks can now be served outside with suitable socially distancing conditions applied. Once frequented by Samuel Pepys it is next to St Mary's Church, another site surveyed in 2013 as part of the biodiversity project. The gravestones support a wide variety of lichens (77 species recorded in one day in January by Mark Powell) and the occasional fungi such as the Parasol Mushroom.

# *Lockdown Diary August*



*"Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou never wert,  
That from Heaven, or near it,  
Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.  
Higher still and higher  
From the earth thou springest  
Like a cloud of fire;  
The blue deep thou wingest,  
And singing still dost soar, and soaring  
ever singest ..."*

*Shelley (1792-1822)*

# 1<sup>st</sup> August



- Computer crashed following a power outage. Nothing works, panic. So, a walk through Hinchbrooke Country Park, what more can I do?
- Lots of plants in full flower as the weather warms. Amongst these are Hoary Ragwort. Not to be confused with the Common Ragwort, which is highly poisonous to domestic animals and is a 'notifiable weed'.
- Grey Herons are always worth a photograph or two. By about 7 million years ago this reptilian like bird had evolved into a species similar to today's. It seems to be the most unlikely bird to nest in trees, looking ungainly. It occurs widely in Europe, Asia and Africa, but not in the Americas.
- The Park built a nest platform for Common Tern. A summer migrant from Africa, it has a black tip to the bill. This helps distinguish it from the Arctic Tern.



# 4<sup>th</sup> August



- Another visit to Brampton Wood, the second largest ancient woodland in Cambridgeshire, after Monk's Wood. The county has less than 4% woodland cover one of the lowest in England. Less than half of this can be classified as 'ancient' i.e., continually wooded since 1700. Once across the A1/A14 the road rises 'steeply' for West Cambridgeshire. The underlying geology is glacial Boulder Clay deposited 450,000 years ago in the Anglian glaciation. Aptly named is the Speckled Wood, often found in woodlands and scrub.
- I always think Jackdaws are wonderful birds, with their comical gait.
- Computer with a company in St Ives for repair.
- I take the opportunity to visit a site nearby. An open space to be kept for people and nature. Part of the Houghton Grange housing development, which includes the old Poultry Research Station. Someone decided to rotavate the grassland on the south side of the development despite its status as a County Wildlife Site.

# 6<sup>th</sup> August



- Weather warm (33°C by mid afternoon) but an early morning walk in River Lane reveals a Great White Heron. As with the Little Egret, its much more common cousin, it has relatively recently arrived from the continent of Europe. Twice the size of the Little Egret and nearly as big as the Grey Heron it also nests in trees. It first nested in Britain in 2012.
- Along the Great Ouse to the Mill the riverside vegetation includes one of two white Bindweeds that look very similar. These are Large and Hedge Bindweed. The former is distinguished by having sepals concealed by two bracts. In the latter the sepals are exposed between the bracts.
- Sitting on the patio at the back of the Mill, overlooking the mill race is a great place to see Reed Warblers and the occasional Kingfisher. At last, some semblance of normality returns.

# 15<sup>th</sup> August



- Swallows, House Martins and Swifts have been noticeably sparse this summer. Unlike previous years when by the end of August, the power lines in the caravan park Bromholme Lane were full of swallows. This year, some reports in the press suggested a freak storm in the Mediterranean in April may have been responsible with many small birds being found dead or injured. Let's hope 2021 is more successful.

- Returning via Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, a brief blue flash of a Kingfisher, too quick for a photograph. In contrast spiders were much easier.

- A Wasp spider and an Orb web spider in long grassland. The former is a relatively recent emigree from Europe. According to Buglife, "*the zigzag design is created to reflect UV light and attract pollinating insects like flies, bees and moths!*" The latter is the Four Spot Orb-weaver spider.



# 30<sup>th</sup> August



- The landscaping of the 12 lane A1/A14 is almost complete. Crossing the bridge over the new road, I ponder the impact of this major development. New tree planting will make up for the losses, but it will take at least 100 years before they reach the stature of many of those that were cut down.
- The lower photograph shows the situation in February 2017 when the line of trees in an earlier aerial photograph (looking south on the left side of the A1) had been removed.
- I also wonder, how creating new roads fits with the Government's climate change agenda.
- Perhaps the new wetlands will in time provide habitat for a range of species new to the Parish. The Little and Common Ringed Plovers referred to in the April diary suggest it might.



*Lockdown Diary  
September & October*

*"No faint and hesitating trill,  
Such tribute as to winter chill  
The lonely redbreast pays!  
Clear, loud, and lively is the din,  
From social warblers gathering in  
Their harvest of sweet lays ..."*

*Wordsworth (September 1819)*

# 1<sup>st</sup> September



- As we move into autumn, summer migrants are beginning to depart. One of the earliest to leave is the Cuckoo, which is usually gone by the mid September.
- There are still several dragonflies about, but now beginning to look a little frayed around the edges. The Brown Hawker continues flying into September, as does the relatively small Migrant Hawker. The former has brown wings, which is different to all other species. A yellow “golf-tee” shaped marking near the top of the abdomen helps distinguish the latter from other similar species.
- Another late flying dragonfly is the Common Darter, which can still be seen into November.

# 14<sup>th</sup> September



- Nearly six months after their introduction, the easing of lockdown rules presents an opportunity to travel outside Brampton Parish. A visit to Earith to finalise a section of the Fen Edge Trail (see <http://www.fenedgetrail.org/>) takes me to what was, some 3,400 years ago, the edge of the sea. The approximate tidal limit is shown on the plan.

- The picture below shows a sweep of this ancient shoreline. The site is Berry Fen Site of Special Scientific Interest. It is important for wintering waterfowl, especially when flooded in the winter. The vegetation also includes several uncommon water plants.

- When flooded and frozen, fen skating and bandy, a forerunner of ice hockey used to take place there.



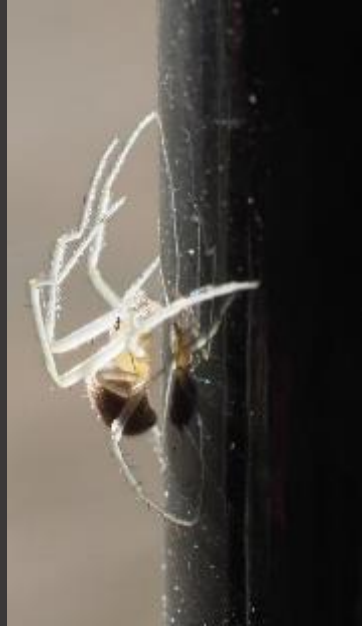
# 30<sup>th</sup> September



- A walk along the old tow path on the River Great Ouse leads yet again to Brampton Mill. The road over the two channels (sluices) which carry the water from the water wheel (only one survives), provides an open view down river.
- The mill pond provides a Grass Snake the opportunity to show off its swimming prowess.
- The ancient trackway known as Bromholme Lane leads to Portholme Meadow. By now the site is grazed by sheep and cattle. Timing and numbers are set out in the conditions for the auction of grazing rights, dating back to 1772.
- An encounter with a Great Spotted Woodpecker returning from the meadow, results in a picture showing one of the main identifying features, the red underneath the tail. Although it feeds mainly on invertebrates, it will take the eggs and young of other cavity-nesting birds.



# 6<sup>th</sup> October



- I tried photographing a few spiders in the garden, including this Large House Spider. As its name implies it is one of the largest in Britain. Other species found earlier in the year include a translucent, possibly immature *Metellina* spp. sorry no English name.
- A few hover flies are also about. The Tapered Drone Fly *Eristalis pertinax* is a common widespread species, which can still be seen in November.
- The County Council footpath map shows a route to the north of the racecourse, a part of the Parish I do not know very well. So, I thought I would venture further afield. Unfortunately, no go as the path is blocked by an earth bank and a deep drainage ditch. Must contact the council to see why this is shown as a footpath on their web site.

# 15<sup>th</sup> October



- Again, a walk to Brampton Wood. On the way, a close encounter with some of the first winter thrushes to arrive from Scandinavia, Fieldfare and Redwing. They feed on berries, especially Hawthorn. Once they have stripped these bare, later in the year they feed in grasslands on invertebrates. When this food source is depleted or unavailable because of frozen ground you may see them behaving more like Blackbirds as they toss leaves aside in search of food.
- Brampton Wood has regular monthly volunteer work parties, who help maintain the wood. This includes clearing footpaths, for the benefit of visitors, and cutting Hazel to encourage new growth (for the benefit of plants and animals). More intensive mechanical management takes place to help clear non native conifers to encourage regeneration of deciduous woodland. This can appear very destructive, but it is remarkable how quickly the deciduous trees that are left grow and others regenerate.

# 25<sup>th</sup> October



- To Brampton Wood again. Can be very good for mushrooms. The Magpie Inkcap Fungus, is one of the many species found in the wood. It is said to be poisonous, although the books tell me, some can eat it with no ill effects. I am going to stick to photography.
- A view along Cross Ride gives a good impression of the layout of the wood. It sits on a boulder clay base deposited around 450,000 years ago. This is relatively impermeable with very poor drainage. This is partly why it was not cleared by Neolithic people and from time to time has led to its closure following heavy rains.
- Berries from Wild Service Tree were used to brew a 'Chequered Past' ale by the Son of Sid Brewery from Little Gransden. Before hops these "Chequers" berries were used to flavour beer, which is thought to be the origin of the pub name.



# 31<sup>st</sup> October



- The large borrow pits left behind following construction of the A1/A14 continue to attract waterbirds sometimes in large numbers. Here Black-headed Gulls in their winter plumage with a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls.



- More fungi. I keep meaning to try to identify this group but with very little success. The white one appears to be the Trooping Funnel. Next to it a field mushroom. No doubt someone will be able to tell me if I am right or wrong. These, together with several other species, were photographed in the field behind Pepys House on Brampton Road
- On this day Boris announces a second lockdown for England.

*Lockdown Diary November &  
December*



*"At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead,  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited.  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small,  
With blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.*

*(Thomas Hardy's 'The Darkling  
Thrush' December 1900)*

# 5<sup>th</sup> November



- A frosty early morning walk along Alconbury Brook and another trip to Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. Trump has been defeated by Biden in the American Presidential election, despite claiming it was 'stolen' from him. He won by a lot he said.
- A small shallow pond over the years has become colonised by Bulrush. Two species occur in the park, Great Bulrush *Typha latifolia* and the smaller Lesser Bulrush *Typha angustifolia*. This is a great place in Summer for dragonflies and damselflies. In order to retain this interest, the pond will need management to restrict this infilling. If left it would ultimately become dominated by willows, and eventually form a small wet woodland.
- In the middle of the pond is a metal sculpture of a dragonfly.

# 9<sup>th</sup> November



- Again, the borrow pit for the A1/A14 attracts a variety of gulls. It now has Grey Wagtail in the surrounding 'waste' ground, a Green Sandpiper and Oystercatcher. The last species, up to the 1960s, recorded in Tebbutt's *'Birds of Huntingdonshire'* as a "Rare passage migrant and winter visitor" is seen (or more often heard) in the Parish. It used to be a mainly coastal breeder, but now breeds regularly along the Great Ouse valley in the wet, flood plain meadow grasslands .
- Random thought: who said in 2012 "climate change was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive" - something he later claimed was a joke?
- As it was a bright day, decided to walk to Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. I was surprised by a Great White Heron, a second record for the Parish. Its recent arrival and the rapid increase of the Common Egret as a breeding species is remarkable. A harbinger of climate change....?

# 15<sup>th</sup> November



- On a walk to Brampton Wood, I pass a small flock of Lesser Redpoll. This is a small bird, which is easily overlooked. However, it is increasingly seen on garden bird feeders, especially liking nyger seeds.
- As we move into winter the feeders attract a wide variety of other birds. In addition to the usual House Sparrows, Starlings, Wood Pigeons and Collared Doves, several rarer and more exotic species turn up from time to time.
- Amongst these are Great Spotted Woodpecker attacking the fat balls as it would a tree. We even had a youngster earlier in the year.
- If the weather gets cold, Reed Buntings are occasional visitors. Here taking a drink from a bird bath.



# 26<sup>th</sup> November



- Throughout lockdown I have been collating the many notes and photographs of the Parish collected over more than 30 years. The beginnings of a book on the Parish are taking shape. The first chapter deals with its prehistory (BR, Before the Romans). The picture shows an important archaeological site, now largely under housing in the northwest of the village. Excavations reveal Neolithic (green), Bronze Age (orange) and Iron Age (black) settlement.
- A walk along the Great Ouse reminds me that much further back in time, conditions were warmer than today by at least 2°C. This was before the last, Devensian Glaciation, which began about 110,000 years ago. In the preceding interglacial period (known as the Ipswichian) much of East Anglia was dominated by a river system perhaps as big as the Mississippi.
- It seems it was warm enough for the Hippopotamus to inhabit the area. Remains of the animal have been found along the river, including at Little Paxton. Although the Great Ouse is much smaller now, it is just possible to imagine them wallowing in the river. Although I was not around to photograph them, you will have to accept a picture from Kenya.

# 5<sup>th</sup> December



- The 2<sup>nd</sup> Lockdown ends and after 4 weeks. Strict lockdown rules under a three-tier system introduced.
- On this day there is enough rain to flood the meadows around Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. After nearly two years with little or no flooding in Brampton, this was just the prelude to a period of severe flooding over Christmas and New Year.
- Some plants such as the Spindle retain fruits into the winter. It is a species indicative of ancient woodland, often planted as an amenity hedgerow tree.
- Returning from the Park via the golf course, which is not flooded, I pass derelict buildings, today used to shelter cattle. These appear to be relicts from the 2<sup>nd</sup> WW when it was the site of a medium frequency radio beacon. This guided the assembly of American bombers before flying to Germany .
- They also provide nesting habitat for Swallows.

# 15<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> December



- On the 15<sup>th</sup> Boris announces restrictions will be relaxed for Christmas. But only 2 days later, he announces in south and southeast England people must stay at home. In the words of the Sherriff of Nottingham played by Alan Rickman in Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves “call off Christmas”.
- Probably just as well as it begins to rain and rain. By Christmas Eve the racecourse is flooded and access to the footpath along Alconbury Brook is impassable on foot. Portholme is also inaccessible.
- Agricultural land adjacent to the village, flooded and impassable.
- Despite this, a walk to the boulder clay ‘uplands’, time to take some sunset photographs.

# 31<sup>st</sup> December



- Water water everywhere. Access to the River Great Ouse from River Lane is still not possible.
- No golf today either.
- Portholme is partially flooded making it ideal for feeding lapwings, which are present in their hundreds. During periods of flooding the site can be extremely important for other waterfowl.
- Black-tailed Godwits, Golden Plover and Wigeon can also be present in hundreds, sometimes several thousand individual birds.
- And so, the end of 2020, an eventful year.



*Lockdown Diary  
January & February  
2021*



*The stonechat is not  
a stonechat. She is simply herself  
on the long twig, by the stones,*

*no, she is not even self — it all simply  
is, on this, the only possible, perfect  
twig.*

*It is look, and oh! and flit, .....*

*Frances Corkey Thompson, 2008*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> January



- No New Year festivities this year, or birthday celebrations, as we are in a tiered Lockdown. The riverside is only just passable, but made it to the Mill, which is still closed of course. A party of 50+ Lapwings fly over the flooded West Field. The extensive period of flooding over the 'festive' season provides even more feeding opportunities for wetland birds (including Bar-tailed Godwits) in the river valley.
- Kingfisher, a fleeting view from the Mill. Watching a Dabchick making use of the high river flow. It worked its way upriver close to the bank, feeding all the time. After about 50 yards it swam out into the river. After being carried about 50 yards downriver it returned to the bank gradually moving upstream feeding again.
- On the way home I meet a birdwatching friend who tells me he has seen Stonechat near the A1/A14 borrow pits. A bird I have not seen in the Parish before, so a trip there is called for.
- There appear to be more Rabbits about and, at least in recent years, no signs of myxomatosis.

# 6<sup>th</sup> January



- On the 3<sup>rd</sup> January, another National lockdown announced.
- Again, the borrow pit west of the A1/A14 is the target for the walk, oh and yes, the Stonechat. No luck, but a good selection of other birds including Green Sandpiper, as usual a single bird feeding along the edge of the lake. The ever-present Little Egret, a small party of Pochard and Tufted Duck.
- Nothing much else to see, although the lake has attracted 3 pairs of Shelduck.
- Not sure what has happened in America on the 6th, but Trump has a lot to answer for.
- Brampton Wood is closed because of the extremely muddy paths. In the late afternoon and from a distance, it can appear to be on fire.



# 12<sup>th</sup> January



*St Kilda Wren*



- Oh, not another walk to the Mill. Along River Lane, a wren flies into the hedge, often heard but less often seen. I think back to a coastal trip in 2018, which included St. Kilda. I had always wanted to see the St. Kilda Wren having been told of a trip by an old farmer friend in the Cotswolds of his visit in the 1930s. This subspecies is larger and louder than our local birds.
- Brampton lock is the only site in the parish for Winter Heliotrope. An introduced plant that has become 'naturalised' on riverbanks. As the name implies it flowers very early in the year. Family *Petasites*, named after the Greek word *petasos*, a wide brimmed felt hat, a tribute to its large leaves.
- A Tree Creeper, Fieldfare and Buzzard are some of the other birds encountered today.





# 24<sup>th</sup> January

- Brexit is over. I received my new blue UK passport today.
- Today was also the first (and only) day this winter with any significant snowfall. A light dusting always enhances the landscape as in Hinchingsbrooke CP.
- It is my impression that winters are now much warmer and wetter than when I was a kid. I have long-believed in human-induced global warming.
- An English engineer called Callendar in 1938 was the first to postulate a link between increased CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere and a rise in global temperatures. Even today 'some' politicians still deny climate change.
- Made it to Alconbury for my first 'jab' - Astra Zeneca. Hardly felt it, and no side effects. The local surgery was extremely well organised, unlike central government.
- And in the village, Hazel catkins, a sign of spring?
- Finally spotted the Stonechat along the perimeter of the gravel pits west of the A1. One of three pairs reported from the area this winter. A thrill, but the weather was dull. Will have to wait for better light on another day.



# 4<sup>th</sup> February



*Hooded  
Merganser*



- The new lakes have brought a variety of water birds. These include, what was thought at first to be a female Red-breasted Merganser. It turned out to be an American Hooded Merganser. I am reliably informed it had escaped from captivity.
- Brampton village has expanded considerably in recent years. The landscape very different from 35 years ago. Then, feeding Golden Plovers and Lapwings on winter wheat. Now, a lake created by gravel extraction and overlooked by new housing.

# 14<sup>th</sup> February



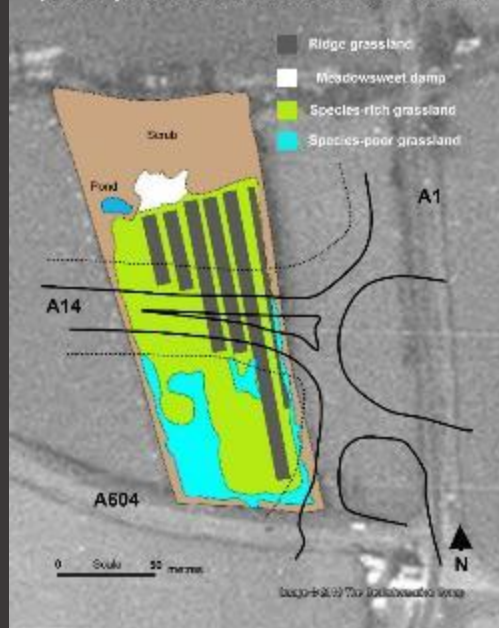
- Valentines Day.
- Water water everywhere, again. Access to the River Great Ouse from River Lane is once again not possible. However, along River Lane the lakes have a small group of seven Shovelers. The broad bill used to filter invertebrates and seeds from the water easily distinguishes it from the larger Mallard. It breeds along the Great Ouse but not in Brampton, where it is a winter visitor and passage migrant.
- Portholme is partially flooded today, and one surprise was a party of Barnacle geese, including one partial albino. Note the larger 'facemask' surrounding the bill, which helps distinguish the species from the Canada Goose. Both are native to the high arctic where they breed. In our area they are feral species, escapees from waterfowl collections.



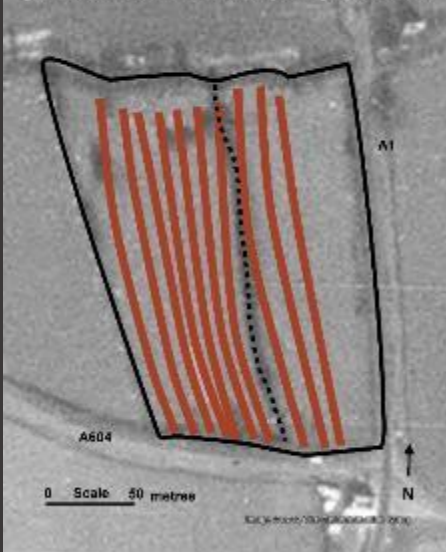
# 28<sup>th</sup> February



Brampton Meadow - sketch map of plant communities present prior to construction of A14/M1 link road



Brampton Meadow - orientation of ridge and furrow grassland, derived from aerial photographs 1940's



- The Dunnock or Hedge Sparrow is not a sparrow at all but a (Hedge) Accentor, and a common sight in our gardens. It has the reputation for being one of the most promiscuous birds. A male will pair with one or more females, or a female with one or more males. Two males and two females may also pair.
- Today, a walk through St. Mary's churchyard. One of the memorials has "In loving memory of:
  - P<sup>IE</sup> James Dale Elliot, died of wounds in Mesopotamia, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1916 Aged 22;
  - P<sup>IE</sup> William Elliot, killed in action Theipval France 27<sup>th</sup> Sept 1916 Aged 21;
  - Walter Ramsey Elliot, died Jan 9<sup>th</sup> 1927 Aged 62;
  - Elizabeth Elliot died 27<sup>th</sup> July 1943 Aged 85."
- The Churchyard is one of several wildlife 'hotspots' identified during a survey of the Parish during 2013/4 by members of the Hunts. Fauna & Flora Society and others.
- Brampton Meadow SSSI, also a 'hot spot' sadly cut in half in 1992 by the now 'old' A14. The southern part of the SSSI is now included in the Brampton Hut retail park.

# *Lockdown Diary March*



*"See at you flitting bird that flies  
Above the oak tree tops at play,  
Uttering its restless melodies  
Of "chipchaf" throughout the day,  
Its nest is built in little bush  
Scarcely a foot above the ground,  
Or hid in clumps of sedge or rush  
In woods where they are rarely found."*

*(Part of a poem about the Chiffchaff,  
John Clare 1793-1864)*



# 1<sup>st</sup> March



- We are now in the 12 month of Covid-19 restrictions.
- It is the beginning of March and Chiffchaffs are already in full song. Not long before we will see the return of the rest of the summer migrants.
- Walking through the village I am attracted by a circling Red Kite. Getting a good picture has proved elusive, despite the fact this is now a common sighting in the Parish. The lighting not always right, the bird too far away or I do not have a long lens with me. Anyway, focusing on the head on this occasion provides an interesting portrait.
- The entrance to Hinchbrooke Country Park is rather muddy.

# 6<sup>th</sup> March



- Borrow Pit 2 on the east of the A1/A14 has already attracted a pair of Ringed Plovers.
- Still rather wet and footpaths along the riverbanks are only just passable. The River Lane gravel pits provide occasional interest. Today a pair of Shoveler and more surprisingly a Red-crested Pochard. Sorry the photograph is not great, a bit far away and because of low light, a high ISO reading.
- The warm March weather helped bring forward some of the early flowering plants such as Wood Anemone and Plum.
- Green Woodpeckers can be heard (a loud, laughing or yaffling call) and seen anywhere and at any time of the year. Woodlands, gardens, golf course and grasslands, where they search out ants and other invertebrates.

# 14<sup>th</sup> March



- A little later in the month a pair of Little-ringed Plovers appear on Borrow Pit 2. I was privileged to watch as the Ringed Plover appeared to be chasing the smaller Little-ringed Plover. That is until the latter had had enough and turned on the bigger bird.
- The A1/A14 has provided these birds with gravel surfaces suitable for camouflaging their eggs. Access by dog walkers from the nearby housing poses a threat as they walk along the lake shore. Let's hope some of them successfully rear chicks.
- On the way home a partially planted hedgerow surrounding the old RAF Brampton Camp, includes the introduced early flowering Norway Maple.
- Lifting lockdown restrictions began on the 8<sup>th</sup> March.



# 20<sup>th</sup> March



- A surprise visitor to the garden this morning - Siskin. This evening Hedgehogs have reappeared in the garden. Last night there were at least four.
- The Grey Wagtail has returned to its traditional breeding site at the Mil.
- Crossing the golf course on the way home, there are often a tiding(s), a charm, a flock, a gulp, a murder, a mischief, a tittering, a conventicle, a tribe, or a congregation of Magpies. Today there were 8, meaning according to the nursery rhyme, 'One for sorry .... etc.' I can have a 'wish'.
- Roadside verges are now etched in the white flowers of the halophyte (salt-tolerant) Danish Scurvygrass. This species has in recent years moved from the coast, liking the salt-spray from gritted road surfaces.
- Cuckoo Flower, flowers early. As the name implies, coinciding with the arrival of the Cuckoo. I have not heard any yet this year, but hopefully they will return soon.

# 30<sup>th</sup> March



- I had to leave the best until last. A little like those nature programmes when they finally capture the sequence they had come for - on the last day of filming. For me it was hearing a sound I could not identify. It soon turned out to be a calling Nuthatch. No doubt seeking a mate. The mature trees on the north side of what is now known as Brampton Park, provide the habitat. This is a bird I remember from my childhood in the Cotswolds.
- Also in the same location are relict populations of plants of ancient woodlands. Including Wood Anemone, Dog's Mercury and Bluebell (the native species not the continental invader, Spanish Bluebell). Echoes of a time, several thousand years ago, when much of the Parish was covered in woodland.
- My wife celebrated a special birthday this month.
- And so, in the hope of better times ahead I leave you with best wishes. I hope you enjoyed reading these personal reflections on the wonderful world of Brampton wildlife.

*Pat Doody, Brampton*