



## *Stratford Park Biodiversity Newsletter* *December 2014*



Hi All,

Unbelievably, we have arrived at the end of another year in Stratford Park and the start of my 7<sup>th</sup> year as supervisor. That role, in any other working environment, could easily be dismissed as an average day to day job, but the scope and diversity afforded within this contract expands that role into many other fields. These days, my role covers engaging with the public, education, leadership, environmental awareness and above all, learning to be diplomatic and understanding at all levels, this seems a far cry from the park keepers of old. Many of the park keepers before me have seen great transition in the horticultural and recreational topography of the park, and I have been fortunate to meet and talk to some of their offspring about their tenures in Stratford Park. In a way, I feel that we are guardians of their legacy, and represent another snapshot in the history of this beautiful green space.

2014 has been yet another year of constructive development regarding biodiversity and conservation management, and although the ten year action plan is being addressed as much as possible within the framework of a grounds maintenance contract, these increments of development and habitat restoration are bearing dividends for both the park's wildlife and the public who visit.

Once again, working with such a wonderful and supportive group of people in the park, has enhanced another enjoyable year. The association that I have with the Museum in the Park is particularly rewarding, and especially Ann (Taylor) and her staff who have worked with me on various talks, walks and public events throughout the year, and Kevin Ward, who has reliably posted the newsletter on the Museum's website each month, extending the circulation further. I extend my thanks also for the support of SDC Public Spaces – Carlos Novoth and Rozelle Jachowicz for entrusting myself and the Landscape Group to make changes for the benefit of wildlife in the park. With an existing 4 year term ahead, I am confident that Stratford Park will be elevated to even greater heights. It just remains for me to wish all those associated with the park who I have worked with and who have supported the monthly biodiversity newsletter, a very happy Christmas and a healthy New Year.

Mike



## *News from the Supervisor's Trap*



### *The value of Holly to wildlife*

Everyone associates Holly with Christmas, and its deep green leaves and vibrant red berries have graced thousands of Christmas cards through the centuries. There is no doubt that this symbolic tree is synonymous with the festive period, but its value to wildlife is often overlooked and underestimated. Stratford Park contains probably the most varieties and best specimens of Holly trees in the Stroud district, including several interesting variegated types, and a holly that bears yellow berries named the Yellow Jacket American Holly *Ilex opaca*.

Holly trees are probably most familiar when they are in fruit, one of the most striking objects in the English winter woodland. The spiny evergreen foliage was said to represent the crown of thorns and the bright red berries the blood of Christ. The tree is steeped in mythology and in mediaeval times was said to repel and defend lightning and witchcraft.

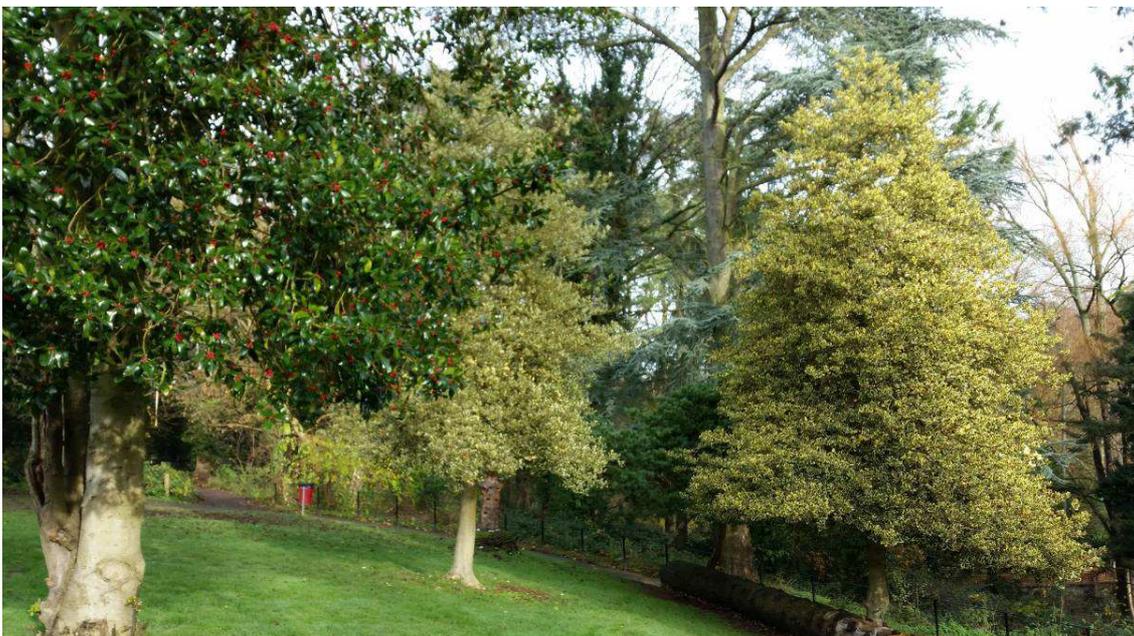
From a horticultural perspective the holly belongs to the family Aquifoliaceae. *Ilex* is a genus of around 600 species of flowering plants and is the only genus within the family. It is a shade tolerant understory tree in woodland and is often associated with oak and beech. Our trees in the park were planted as specimen trees. The holly flowers in May and June producing a cluster of small, white and waxy petals, and these are followed in autumn by the berries, which at first, are green turning bright red when ripe.

Holly is an important tree in the ecosystem providing dense cover and good nesting opportunities for birds. In the park holly is the main tree chosen by Blackbirds and Song thrushes to build their nests. In winter, the berries are feasted upon by Fieldfares Redwings and Mistle thrushes. During the very cold winter of 2009-10, the park received a huge influx of Redwings which stripped every berry from every tree within one day. In autumn the flowers provide nectar and pollen for a multitude of bees and other pollinating insects. The leaves are eaten by various moths including the yellow barred brindle, double striped pug and holly tortrix. Stratford Park supports a strong population of the Holly blue butterfly *Celastrina argiolus*. Its caterpillars feed on holly and ivy. The eggs are laid singly at the base of unopened flower buds of the foodplant. There are two broods each year in spring and summer. Numbers fluctuate from year to year due partly to the parasitism of a small wasp called *nyctemerus* which lays its eggs in the Holly Blue larvae.



**(Holly Blue butterfly)**

Of course, holly remains synonymous with Christmas and is widely used to decorate homes in winter, and when I collect my door wreath from the Museum each Christmas, there is something very organic and fulfilling in taking a piece of the park to my home. It is good to see that this important tree is being included in the present tree planting in the park, and when you are next in the park admiring its colourful berries, consider also, its value to wildlife.



**(Varieties of Holly in the Arboretum)**

## *Slender Burnished Brass ‘a very rare occurrence’*

Whilst filtering through a pile of e-mails in the office on the morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> November, one heading caught my eye, titled ‘moth’. The sender, Dr Malcolm Savidge (Chairman Model Railway Society), regular attendee of the Stratford Park Management Group and a fellow moth enthusiast had attached some images to his e-mail. Rather inadvertently, I dismissed the e-mail to get on with work in the park, but returned to it during a later lunch break. On opening the attachment to Malcolm’s e-mail, I immediately put down my coffee and stared at the image of the moth he had photographed. This moth was different, this moth was something special – this moth was a slender burnished brass. I replied immediately to Malcolm confirming the species, but asked if he could catch the moth and bring it to the park without delay for further verification. He replied that it had been visiting his kitchen for a few days, but was coming to the end of its days. The next day Malcolm e-mailed me to say that the moth had expired and that he would bring it to the park for me. My elation and enthusiasm met with some slapstick humour from the other staff, but when I explained to them that this was a very rare moth, they too awaited its impending delivery. The next morning I received an e-mail from Malcolm saying ‘*Thysanoplusia orichalcea* is being delivered this afternoon (he’d naturally googled it). As promised, the specimen arrived that afternoon and I was delighted to confirm the moth as Slender Burnished Brass, a very rare immigrant species. Although dead, the specimen was in good condition so I told Malcolm that I would ‘relax’ it, set it and take another photo to send on to the county moth recorder and others within the local entomological fraternity.

I am sure that most readers will have never heard of the Slender Burnished Brass moth, but as far as Gloucestershire and the UK is concerned, it is a very rare visitor. To date only 100 individuals have ever been recorded in the British Isles, 91 of these pre 1981 (**Skinner, B. 1981, *Colour Identification Guide to the Moths of the British Isles*. Apollo Books). Newton, J. (1982-3) *Macrolepidoptera in Gloucestershire* states ‘Devil’s Chimney, Leckhampton, May 1976 (Dr M.W. Harper), although this entry appeared to be deleted by the editor Dr RP Beckinsale before purchase, and the following substituted “Southrop 14.10.1078 (EW Classey, *Ent. Gaz.* 30, 1979, p.72)”. Roger Gaunt (County Moth Recorder 2006), in his **Gloucestershire Moths (A Second Account) 2006**, states ‘1980 – 2004 No records’. This therefore indicates that the Slender Burnished Brass has not been recorded in Gloucestershire for 35 years and this new sighting represents an important record for the county, and certainly a first record for the Stroud District. A strong immigration of Lepidoptera to the UK during September and October has thrown up some interesting species including the Clifden nonpareil at a site next to the park, and mentioned in last month’s newsletter. The Slender Burnished Brass is distributed in the Mediterranean and African regions, where the larvae feed on a number of herbaceous plants. The chart below shows 1 record only for Gloucestershire pre 2000. Also shown is a photo of the moth at rest, sent by Malcolm and the set specimen by the writer. I will add finally, that when I expressed to Malcolm my disappointment that the moth wasn’t found in the park, he replied jokingly, that ‘it could be deposited in the park for a small fee’ and that the writer could take the credit for the record, a comment which I took with good humour.**



## *2<sup>d</sup> Phase tree planting in Park*

This month saw the start of a second phase of tree planting in Stratford Park, once again coordinated by Richard Lewis (Stroud Valleys Project). This is part of a long term sustainability program to replace lost trees, create new habitats and provide trees for future generations. The trees planted as part of 'phase one' back in March, have all established well along the top perimeters. This planting schedule continues with the creation of a central copse, primarily of Aspen and swathes of other native species along the existing woodland perimeters. The trees are being planted by volunteers of Stroud Valleys Project, including our very own Sam Morgan, who will hopefully return to the Landscape Group next year as a volunteer in the park.

## *New Black Poplars to commemorate WW1 Centenary*

Kevin Ward (Museum in the Park) spotted this article in the Stroud News and Journal and suggested that the park applies for some replacement poplars (see newspaper clip below) to replace ones lost in the recent storms. 50 are being offered free by Gloucestershire Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, and SDC has secured 2 of the trees for Stratford Park to commemorate soldiers of the First World War. These will be planted in the park in the near future.



## *New 'Poplar Bridge' completed*

Talking of lost poplar trees, last month I included a picture of the poplar tree which fell across the stream during the storms in February, which showed the huge main trunk halfway through its transformation into a new bridge. Contractors have now completed the sawing, shaping and planing of the tree and fitted the final hand rails and steps. The final result is, quite simply, brilliant, and a walk over it gives a whole new dimension to the stream. The railings, in green, blend in well with the environment and the rope hand rails give it a 'jungle feel'. One last job will be to install a non-slip surface as naturally as possible, and to carry out a few adjustments to the accesses of the site, which Landscape Group staff will carry out in the New Year.

Whilst standing on the bridge recently and enjoying the new views, a kingfisher, like a streak of sapphire, flew up the stream and right under the bridge below me. I am sure that this will provide a great viewing point for those attending our wildlife and bird walks in the future, and credit again must go to Mark Graham (SDC Public Spaces Officer) for creating and overseeing the project through all of its stages.



**(The new completed bridge December 2014)**



(The first hard frosts of 2014 covered the park on the late date of 24<sup>th</sup> November)

Photo: Mike McCrea



## *Wildlife to see now in Stratford Park*



**BIRDS:** December is a great time to see birds in the park, as many of our resident birds are supplemented by migrants from the continent. There has been an evident influx of Blackbirds, and Redwing and Fieldfare numbers are up from last year. On the top field, large flocks of feeding finches can be seen working through the trees, these are mainly Goldfinches and Chaffinches, but a few Siskin are present most days. Our resident Sparrowhawk has been active this month, with many 'kills' found in the woodland, mainly pigeons. Nutchatch and Goldcrests are common this winter, the latter probably swelled by immigrant birds. Kingfisher is a regular visitor to the stream and the new poplar bridge affords good views of this bird over the stream. Treecreeper has been very secretive this month, and numbers appear to be well down on previous years. On the lake, Tufted duck is an occasional visitor, and flocks of Black-headed gulls are joining feeding ducks. Great-spotted woodpecker is present in the woodland and Green woodpecker is on the main field every morning. Sharon Tucker sent in the photo below of a Green woodpecker feeding on her lawn next to the park – no doubt, one of our birds. A Peregrine was seen flying over the park on 1<sup>st</sup> December. A walk through the far beech woodland will show flocks of Long-tailed tits and these are joined by Blue and Great tits. On the stream at the salmon springs end of the woodland Grey wagtail and Dipper are present most days. With less rainfall this autumn, Dipper appears to be feeding more in the shallower water in this part of the stream.

## CONTACT

Mike McCrea Tel 07833091294 E-Mail [mmccrea@thelandscapegroup.co.uk](mailto:mmccrea@thelandscapegroup.co.uk)

## USEFUL LINKS

[www.thelandscapegroup.co.uk](http://www.thelandscapegroup.co.uk) [www.museuminthepark.org.uk](http://www.museuminthepark.org.uk) [www.stroudinbloom.co.uk](http://www.stroudinbloom.co.uk)  
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[www.theaes.org](http://www.theaes.org)



(Green Woodpecker Photo: Sharon Tucker)

**MERRY CHRISTMAS**

