



## *Stratford Park Biodiversity Newsletter September 2019*

Hi All,

On a recent visit to Cheddar Gorge last month, we stopped at one of the many roadside cafés to have a coffee. Those of you who have visited Cheddar will know that the stream running through it is pristine in its clarity with lovely flowing water plants. The café we decided to stop at had a small stream underneath its frontage right next to the path. Whilst looking into the stream to admire its moving beauty I was astonished to see a creature that I had not seen since childhood, scuttling out of its little home beneath the water weed; this little gem was a water vole and it made my day. I managed to quickly get a picture of it as it fixed its eyes on mine. When our coffees were delivered I said excitedly to the young waitress, who was about 19, "We have just seen a water vole by your café". She seemed amazed and said "Where?" I pointed to the bit of water where we had seen it and then she said: "what's a water vole?" This really resonated with me and reminded me again of how the young generation of today is so detached from nature. At primary school for a 1960s schoolboy, nature study was high on the curriculum, in fact this writer did pond dipping in the park's lake during 1968!

During the 1960s water voles were a common sight on the stream running through the park. I did some research on returning home that day to learn that since the 1960s water voles have declined by 90%, which mirrors a downward trend with so many other species. I would like to hope that my grandchildren will know what a water vole is when they are older, which is one of the reasons why promoting nature to the younger generation is so important in our present times.

Mike

## *News from the Supervisor's Trap*

### *Stratford Park (Past and Present)*



During recent weeks, through the wonder of social media, I have had the good fortune of communicating with someone who previously worked in the park between 1966 and 1990 and who has filled many gaps in my knowledge of past grounds maintenance. Our correspondence has given me a fascinating insight into how the park was once run and how it compares with present times. I had been preparing an article on our composting methods and how sustainable we are in providing compost and mulch for our flower beds. I had wanted to know how previous park employees dealt with this, how they processed green waste, where they stored it, and their methods of disposal. It was completely coincidental that this coincided with me joining a social media group about past Stroud, where I saw an old picture of Stratford Park circa late 1970s. I immediately contacted the person who had posted the picture and introduced myself as the park's present supervisor. It turned out that the person was an Iain Jones, who was employed at the park for 26 years. As a boy, I can remember him working in the park. Iain would have been working here when I was learning about the birds in the park, and regrettably, collecting their eggs. Since we have been communicating, Iain has given me lots of information about the park and who managed it. He also sent me a photo of himself taken in early 1972 in the potting shed, which was then in the Walled Garden. I presented him with the following questions which are transcribed herewith.

**Mike** - Hi Iain, in the early days, how did you dispose of the park's green waste, shred, compost or remove from site, what year did the badgers disappear and what year did you stop growing your own bedding?

**Iain** – All our green waste was burned, sad I know. Grass clippings were simply stacked in smelly heaps behind the 'secret garden'. Afterwards it was tipped in a secluded area behind the maintenance yard. There were no badgers in the woodland as I recall, although I do remember one being found behind an oak tree near what was called the kissing gate giving access to the footpath across a field just below the children's play area [*This is the path leading into Callowell field – Mike*]. It was my decision to close the nursery garden and cease production of all bedding and ornamental plants. This was simply to do with cost and lack of functions. Stroud Show had been cancelled at that time and there was only the carnival procession from the top of the town to the park itself and the fun fair.

**[Footnote:** Despite Iain's comments, badgers were present in the park with established setts all along the top perimeter of the woodland. Fresh bedding was seen being dried outside of the setts on a regular basis - Mike.]

**Iain** – To continue also, the chairman's reception ceased as well as the Autumn Show, which was held in the Subscription Rooms. These were floral displays only. Also I took into account maintenance costs, greenhouse heating, and staffing costs. It was found to be a cheaper option to buy the park's plants wholesale rather than grow them ourselves. I closed the Nursery garden in 1989, I'm pretty certain of that year, and I have a photograph of me taken by a photographer from the Citizen in 1972 shortly after the completion of my

apprenticeship and a couple of days before I was presented with my certificates by the then Chairman of the Council, Desmond Harper. I am proud to say I was Stroud Urban District Council's first park apprentice before merging with the Stroud Rural District Council in 1974.

*(Iain Jones in the potting greenhouse Walled Garden Stratford Park 1972. Photo: Courtesy Iain Jones)*



*On sending me the photograph (left), Iain provided an amusing anecdote of the time of the picture.*

**Iain** – The photo was taken early 1972, but I wasn't a happy bunny! If you look closely at the picture, over my right shoulder, the gentleman standing there is Arthur Elkin, who was Park Superintendent at the time. George Ham stepped into his shoes when Arthur retired a couple of years later. The reason I'm looking a little peeved, is that the photo shoot had been pre-arranged. It was scheduled for a Monday morning and on the Friday before, Arthur instructed me to get my hair cut over the weekend and to look presentable. My girlfriend at the time – a trainee hair stylist - lopped a good six inches off my locks, but it wasn't good enough for Arthur, who is standing behind me giving me grief. "I told you to get your hair cut," he was muttering. I replied: "I did, so ---- off!" I remember responding. Not only that, but I was also slightly hungover, and I'd wanted to be photographed doing something more manly than

holding a plant in a pot, but because it was chucking it down, I had to be photographed indoors. Because of my long locks someone I worked with called me 'Annie', a name that I carried with me until I left the park some twenty years later.

*We then returned to the issue of composting and I explained to Iain how sustainability is an important part of our company ethic and that we were recycling almost 100% of our green waste on our contract.*

**Iain** – Glad to hear you are composting, I'm a great advocate of it these days. Funnily enough, during my apprenticeship days several people I worked with said composting had no beneficial properties, that's why everything was burned, despite my arguments that at Hartpury we were being taught the benefits of composting. One old sage actually said to forget everything I was being taught at Hartpury, it was what I was learning at the park that was more important. Experience, I was told, is the best qualification I could hold. There is a lot of truth in that statement, I agree, but at 69 years old, I'm still learning.

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One thing I have learned from corresponding with Iain is how things have changed so much since the 1970s. We know just how much green waste we recover and process each year, and it is a huge amount. Without the machinery and facilities to recycle this we would have mountains of green waste. It seems incredible that everything was burned back then, and what about the carbon footprint? This would have also had Health & Safety implications.

Clearly Iain's time working in the park was during a period when H&S was not a priority. Working practices have changed a great deal; we now have dedicated storage bays containing mulch, wood chippings and good quality compost. Previous EMAS audits by our client have commended our sustainability; burning everything is not an option these days. For me, working in a supervisory role in the park today, talking with Iain is revealing a fascinating insight into life in Stratford Park during the 1960s and 70s.

## *Finding the Lepidopterist's Holy Grail*

After much anticipation of celebrating National Moth Night, our moth event in the park on 27<sup>th</sup> September was sadly cancelled due to wind and rain. We had planned to provide hot soup and rolls for those attending that night to make it more of a family occasion. Abigail and I will be revisiting this when we schedule next years' events.

The theme for Moth Night this year was migration and in particular, the Clifden nonpareil which has been extinct in the UK for 50 years but is making a comeback. The moth, considered the Holy Grail amongst Lepidopterists in Victorian times, is a very rare visitor to this country between July and October, but appears to be re-establishing itself here with sightings throughout the UK. The moth even featured on Sky News recently. Therefore, our main quarry on Moth Night was this species. The chances of seeing one? Probably 10000:1.

The few days preceding the moth event saw me off work resting an injured leg, but during this time I was able to run the garden moth trap at my Whitminster home each night. Most mornings the catch revealed most of the usual garden visitors, but on the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> September it was very mild and overcast and somehow I knew something special was going to arrive. My expectations were exceeded the following morning when I examined the catch only to see a pristine Clifden nonpareil! I was astounded as this is a moth that I have never seen in my lifetime. So, although our moth event in the park was cancelled a few days later, I had caught the prize of all prize moths which I photographed (below).





## *Woodland works to recommence this winter*

After a two year suspension, SDC has agreed to revisit the Biodiversity Action Plan and continue with woodland management this winter. Various proposals were put forward at October's Stratford Park Management Group meeting by Malcolm Savidge (Chairman Stroud Model Railway Engineers) to enhance areas to the lower woodland. Due to financial constraints, woodland management work has been on hold during the last two years and this has meant that some areas have become impassable and overgrown.

One of the most important tasks over recent years has been to make the woodland more accessible to the public. Until 2013 many of the original paths had become overgrown and precipitous making much of the woodland impenetrable. Scrub encroachment had blocked out light and the amount of ground flora had reduced substantially. Our objective was to identify the safest route around the woodland and restore those paths, making them more level and safe. In spring 2017 we re-established the top path, widening this and adding timber edge boards. This allowed members of the public with children's buggies to access the woodland. In 2016, along with Model Railway Engineers, we created a new path along the lower section of the woodland. Although these sections of path will need restoring again following the cessation of work, our next priority will be to make safe the steep section of path adjacent to the stream at salmon springs. When completed, this will complete the full woodland path circuit.

There is also a considerable amount of scrub clearance to do, which will be carried out by Stroud Valley's Project Volunteers. The volunteers are also providing 2000 wildflower bulbs which will be planted this autumn in the far beech wood. Another important job will be to repair and restore the tree bridge over the stream which has proved popular with visitors. Once again, members of the Model Railway Engineers will assist with this. The work on the ground will be overseen by the idverde team, who will carry out the preliminary groundwork.

In recent years, Stratford Park Woodland has been recognized as a biodiversity hotspot, with breeding Tawny owls and Sparrowhawks. In summer the woodland supports several species of warbler, a strong population of nuthatches, and kingfisher and dipper on the adjacent stream. The Stratford Park Biodiversity Action Plan commissioned by SDC in 2011 is active as a working entity until winter 2021 and includes ongoing work, not only in the woodland but around the main field where development is now proposed.



(Woodland management work started in 2012)

## *Gold Award for Stratford Park*

I am delighted to announce that at the recent Britain in Bloom Awards, Stratford Park was awarded a Gold. With just over one year remaining to our contract here, the award couldn't come at a better time, and to achieve Gold on our very first entry is a testament to all of the hard work that the team and I have put into the park this year.

We took a calculated risk this year in converting some of the annual flower beds to permanent sustainable beds, but the gamble paid off as the new beds were stunning. Another pivotal contribution was our summer seasonal, Phil Pullen, who through his hard work, gave us greater flexibility to cover all areas, particularly the flower beds and Sensory Garden. We all worked in sweltering heat in what was the hottest summer on record.

Although we are only a small team, somehow we manage to keep the park looking good. I know that the guys have a passion for the place and we all work well together. Our management network is supportive and our client relationship is excellent. With these attributes, Stratford Park could not be in better hands. We all know that most public spaces suffer from anti-social behaviour and vandalism and the park has had its fair share this year, which can be very deflating for us, but achieving this award strengthens our resolve and encourages commitment to our roles. So, a big thank you to Paul, Shaun, Andy and Phil from a very pleased supervisor.



## *Wildlife to see now in Stratford Park*

**BIRDS:** This month Jays have been collecting acorns from the oaks next to the play area and good close up views of these can be had. Ravens are in the arboretum. A kestrel was over the park on 6<sup>th</sup> October. Sparrowhawk is still in the woodland. Common buzzard is over the park most days. In the woodland – treecreeper, goldcrest, coal tit, nuthatch, great-spotted woodpecker, green woodpecker and mistle thrush.

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(Autumn morning in Stratford Park Photo: Mike McCrea)