
FRIENDS of FOREST FARM and Glamorganshire Canal Local Nature Reserve

NEWSLETTER No 3 - October 1991

EDITOR'S FORUM

I am delighted to report on behalf of your Executive Committee the many activities in which we are engaged. Also the innovative ideas which we have for developments in keeping with the future Country Park status but retaining the unique characteristics of the area. My thanks to the contributors, and to Robin Sotheby for layout and Gllr Vic Riley for assistance with photocopying.

The Glamorganshire Canal 1951 - 1991.

E.O.Edwards.

After the tragedy of the 'Catherine Enall' and the loss of water out of the Canal, the Cardiff Corporation, owners of the Canal, decided to fill it in and dispose of the land in various ways. Sites were sold to BHS and Mackross for £120,000, and other sites along the Canal leased for £20,000 - quite a good return for their outlay of £44,000. Nothing was done about the section from Queen Street to the Sea Lock, even though the public complained bitterly about the stench and the rats, until a 13-year old boy, son of Mrs Bowen of Dudley Place, was badly burnt. A tramp had lit a fire in the bed of the Canal against the side of an old paint barrel; this exploded and threw burning paint over the boy, injuring him severely. This forced the Corporation to fill in that section of the Canal and create a pleasant patch of greenery for walks and recreation, stretching from the sea to the top end of Bute Street.

In the agreement between the Cardiff Corporation and Lord Bute on the sale of the Canal, section 31 stated that the Corporation was required to use the Canal and its lands lying between Melingriffith and Tongwynlais for public enjoyment. As a result of representations made to the City Council by Cardiff Naturalist Society, supported by other interested bodies the Council, in June 1967, resolved to designate this section of the Canal and adjoining woodland as a Nature Reserve. In 1981, the Reserve (including the railway cutting) was declared a Statutory Local Nature Reserve (LNR) in accordance with section 19 of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act.

By today, this section of the Canal is full of clean water flowing gently and peacefully, a home to all sorts of creatures and plant life. There is a variety of different habitat types - alder carr, woodland, meadow and scrub, and consequently a rich assemblage of different types of plants and animals. Bird life is

abundant - around 90 different species recorded so far. It is an excellent place to introduce young people to the World of Nature and teach them how to understand and enjoy it. If anyone wants to take advantage of this opportunity, consult Mr Chris Powell on Cardiff 751295.

Editor's note: The conclusion of this engrossing article covering Forest Farm and the rest of the Reserve will follow in a future Newsletter.

Health Land. The City Planning Committee will be making their decision on 31st October. Ted Edwards, Mike Wiley and Dr Mary Gillham are meanwhile submitting a supplement to our objection to the housing development. The purpose is to provide further details of the wildlife value of the site - both as it stands at present and as it might be managed for the future.

Disabled Access. Much thought is being applied to facilitate access for the disabled to the Nature Reserve. The towpath presents an ideal surface allowing access to the canal with views overlooking Longwood and the bottom meadows and marshes (ideal for bird-watching). Velindre Road end of the reserve presents problems with a steep incline, but this would have to be overcome by the building of a ramp alongside the existing footpath. The work would be done in phases, and funding is a major consideration. The 'Friends' have joined 'UK 2000' in order to become eligible for grant assistance for projects such as this.

Membership. The Secretary reports that newly enrolled members will in future receive a pack containing a letter of welcome, a recent copy of the Newsletter and a copy of the Constitution. Membership total is 127.

The Grey Squirrel

(Sciurus Carolinensis)

M.Wiley

[The name Sciurus literally means 'he who shades himself with his tail'].

Recently, while out walking through the woods one morning my attention was caught by a rustling of leaves. With interest I watched a large grey squirrel busily burying acorns. Having dug a small hole, the acorn was duly inserted and covered over. The surface was then meticulously patted down with its front paws, leaving no sign of the hidden larder. The same process was repeated every few feet.

This concealed store will be unearthed during winter when food is scarcest (contrary to popular belief, squirrels do not hibernate in winter but, like many people during really cold spells they spend less time in the open).

How they come to find the acorns again is debatable. One line of thought is that they locate them by scent, another, that by scratching around they come upon them by accident. Either way, some acorns are not found, and they will grow to form new trees. So the squirrel, like the Jay (which also buries acorns), does its bit towards seed dispersal and tree planting.

Unfortunately, nuts, fruit and fungi are not their only source of protein. The grey squirrel will readily take birds eggs, or the young nestling themselves. As I mentioned in a previous article, the nest boxes made and erected by our WATCH group had their entrance holes enlarged, and the nests robbed.

Another habit is to strip the bark from trees. I have watched them tearing bark from sycamore, their favourite, in order to lick the sweet sugary sap just beneath.

Sometimes they will completely 'ring bark' a tree, thus killing it. Sycamore, an alien and very fast growing tree, can be a pest in a wood; the squirrel thus 'does its bit' for conservation, but native trees like the beech are also prone to come under attack. This was one of the reasons the government tried unsuccessfully to exterminate them (a price of 1s/6d once being on their tails).

The grey squirrel itself, of course, is not native to Great Britain - we introduced it from America in the 1870's.

The grey is much larger, stronger and more gregarious than our shy native red, with its feathery ear tufts. This difference in size and nature was first thought to be the reason for the rapid decline of the red squirrel in Britain, due to unequal competition. It was later discovered that an epidemic disease was the culprit.

The red is now confined to the Isle of Wight, North and Mid Wales and Scotland,

where they tend to prefer conifer woodlands. In these areas they seem to be on the increase because of the blanket planting of conifers; so at least some good comes out of the unnatural conifer afforestation.

There is no red squirrel on the reserve, or indeed in South Wales, but I well remember the time a couple of years ago when an excited chap, out for a walk on the reserve, came running toward me with the news that he had just seen a red - understandably mistaken by the grey taking on a red appearance at certain times of the year.

The winter drey, usually built close to the trunk of a tree, is made up of a ball of twigs, often with leaves attached and lined with moss and fur; the summer drey is built out near the ends of branches. Two litters a year are produced - spring and summer - with usually 3 or 4 young, which are called kittens.

One winter afternoon, while working near the towpath I frightened a squirrel, which raced up a solitary oak tree. I watched, intrigued to see whether it would try and get back to the wood and its drey on the other side of the canal - a jump of some 15 feet. After some hesitation it leapt. Landing on the very tips of the canopy it unsuccessfully tried to gain a hold and fell 25 feet to the canal. I had often wondered whether squirrels could swim. My question was soon answered; no sooner had it hit the freezing water, than it swam rapidly to the far bank, shook itself and darted up a nearby oak, back to the warmth of its drey, looking no worse the wear from its icy ducking.

Butterfly Garden.

Consideration is being given to the presentation of information on the site. A plaque would indicate how the garden was initiated and an information board would assist in insect and plant identification. Unfortunately, vandalism must be taken into account.

The Hide. Consideration is also being given to the siting of a hide near the new scrape.

Work Projects.

We are in need of volunteers for on-going projects - e.g. the Butterfly Garden. If you can join a work group, please ring our Secretary, Dennis Davies, Cardiff G91051. He is co-ordinating operations, and compiling a list of volunteers. Next date for a working party on the Butterfly Garden is **Sunday 3rd November**. Among other things, there will be a meadow rake; this helps to keep the fertility low.



Ronald Lockley.

Chris James

For many years I have been interested in the work of Ronald Lockley, a Cardiff boy born in Plessey Road in 1903 and now living in New Zealand. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Heol Don, Whitchurch, where his mother set up a school for fee-paying pupils. The location of the school, Milford House, eluded me until mid-June this year, when I received a telephone call from Mrs Marjorie Davies of Heol Don...

"Chris, was it you who was enquiring about a private school in Heol Don that existed about 80 years ago?"

I replied that I had been interested in finding out which house had belonged to the Lockleys. Marjorie continued...

"Mr Lockley has been here in my house, talking about his days in Cardiff. He is making a film of his life with Channel 4, and has found Milford House."

What an unexpected surprise to hear this news - and that he would shortly be returning to his Heol Don house! It was arranged by the Davies' that I should meet Mr Lockley while he was involved in filming at Milford House, and at the Reserve.

The prospect of the meeting filled me with excitement. Lockley is not widely known in his home town, despite the fact that his work as a farmer and naturalist is known around the world. His interest in natural history was aroused by his mother, during convalescence after an illness which almost claimed his life. The young Lockley was encouraged to keep a diary and was given a bird book. He learned to identify the garden birds, and kept his diary. It was at this point he claims to have found true happiness. This was the turning point in his life.

He spent much of his time around the Forest Farm area observing wildlife and also helping George Whitcombe, a local farmer and haulier. After leaving school, he set up a small enterprise raising chickens on land

loaned to him by George Whitcombe. This became too small for him; he moved to a farm near St Mellons.

At this time he was in his twenties and had developed a passion for islands. This passion drove him to start farming the island of Skokholm off the Pembrokeshire coast. It was here he established Britain's first bird observatory and established himself as one of Britain's foremost naturalists, working on Shearwaters and other seabirds. He was also co-founder of the West Wales Naturalist Trust (now Dyfed Wildlife Trust). During the war years, his time was spent on the mainland farming Dinas Island, and as a Government Flax Officer. The 'Farmer & Stockbreeder' ran regular articles on his pioneering practices during that period.

In 1949 the Norman manor house at Orielton in S. Pembrokeshire was purchased by Lockley. Here he wrote his book, 'The Private Life of the Rabbit'. Orielton is now a Field Studies Council field centre. Ronald Lockley left Wales in 1970 to live with his daughter in New Zealand. From his Skokholm days of the 1920's to emigrating to New Zealand he worked with such eminent naturalists as James Fisher, Max Nicholson and Peter Scott. He has written some fifty books, the most recent published this year, 'Birds and Islands: Travels in Wild Places'.

Those of us who met Ronald Lockley this summer were impressed by his determination to enjoy wild places. As a pioneer of nature reserves in Britain and abroad, it was gratifying to hear him describe this Glamorgan Canal Reserve as a 'Jewel'. He was also motivated to write an objection to the City Council's plan to include the hospital fields in the Local Plan.

One memory of my meeting which will endure is of the 87-year old sampling an unripe pear from a pear tree of his childhood in Milford House, and finding it as unpalatable in June 1991 as the fruits of June 1910.

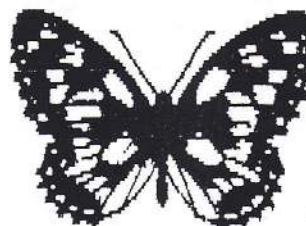
The Channel 4 programme on his life promises to be something worth watching; it is due to be broadcast this year.

Member's Letter. I would like to offer congratulations to all the 'Friends' who have been involved in any way at all in the setting up of the Butterfly Garden at Forest Farm. I think everyone who has seen it has been overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the mass and colour of the flowers, particularly during July and August, and to have produced such a display in so brief a time is nothing short of miraculous. I know I am not only speaking for myself when I say what an enormous amount of pleasure it has given, and I think we all owe a great debt of gratitude to those who have worked so hard

to achieve these amazing results. Thank you and well done!

Sheila Kernick.

Editor's note: A number of butterflies which developed in the Garden have been observed by the eagle-eyed. This encourages us to continue on its enhancement.



The Winter Programme of Events.

As was the case last year, the Friends have organised a series of talks during the winter. These take place on several Wednesday evenings at the BETHEL HALL, Park Road, Whitchurch, at 7.30 pm.

This year we have been fortunate to be able to attract speakers who are well-informed about a number of issues which should be of interest to members.

The first speaker will be Mr Guy Hawle, who works in the Fisheries division of the National Rivers Authority in Cardiff. He will speak to us on 20th November concerning the improvements in quality which we have all observed in the local rivers over the past few years.

Mr R. Alan Stevens, who has a long-standing interest in local Industrial Archaeology and has written books on the canals of South Wales, will speak to us on 29th January 1992. His talk will concern how the Glamorganshire Canal fits into place with the developments of canals in South Wales generally.

Finally, on 25th March 1992, Mr Dave Bull will present us with an outline of the results of the bird ringing studies, which he and others have been undertaking in the County over the past few years.

The Sunday Walks continue throughout the winter: please meet at the Forest Farm Warden's Centre on the second Sunday of each month at 10 am.

The Reserve and Education. Esther Jennings

The purpose of the Friends is to promote the interests of the Reserve by providing a public focus for its use. To help advance this aim, a group is to be established to produce educational material, in the first instance for sale to schools at a nominal price, by the Friends.

The National Curriculum requires children 'to be able to sort living things into broad groups according to observable features' and 'to know that living things respond to seasonal and daily changes'. (Science in the National Curriculum: Attainment Target 2).

What better resource to use to enable children to reach these and other attainments, than the Reserve?

It is proposed to produce one or more 'Educational Packs' for use by schools. The Packs should enable children to explore the Reserve in a structured way, learning as they go, and probably should also provide follow-up work. For instance, the National Curriculum requires pupils to 'be able to give an account of a project to help improve the local environment' (ATS). The reserve provides many possible starting points for this. The Packs should probably not be limited only to science. It should be possible to link up with History, Mathematics and other disciplines.

If you are interested in joining a working group to produce these packs, have any expertise to offer or any suggestions, please contact me on Cardiff 625021. The first group meeting will be held at the B.T.C.V. office at Forest Farm on Thursday 7th November at 7.30 pm.

Bar-B-Que. Held on 25th July, this was again a great success, with a turnout of over 50 members. Plenty to eat and drink; while the adults chatted the kids went walking, and enjoyed a Bat Watch.

Serenity

*I will go again to a gentle haunt
Where freedom is found with time for rare
moments
When nature's secret store can be unlocked.
Share with kindred spirits an aura of hope
Which restores serenity for all who visit
Forest Farm and the Local Nature Reserve.*

KFP

General. Our new Newsletter distribution organiser, Tom Colston has been co-opted on the Committee (Very welcome - Ed.). Mr Brian Taylor, Senior Community Education Officer of the Whitchurch Youth Centre, has expressed an interest in the involvement of youth with environmental matters. We welcome the possibility of the Youth Centre participating in these projects, which would bring mutual benefit.

Membership enquiries to Mrs Stephanie Crocker, 45 Penlline Road, Whitchurch, Cardiff (0222 610043).

The Newsletter Editor wishes to state that all views expressed by contributors are their own, as is the responsibility for them.

Published on behalf of Friends of Forest Farm and Glamorganshire Canal Local Nature Reserve, by Mr K. Patterson, 12 Manor Court, Whitchurch, Cardiff, CF4 1BJ (0222 627077).

