FRIENDS

OF FOREST FARM COUNTRY PARK AND GLAMORGANSHIRE CANAL LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

ISSUE 47 MARCH 2003

Editor's Forum

Ken Patterson

A warm welcome to new 'Friends', as evidenced in our Membership Secretary's report.

A decision was reached by our Committee that the new estate residents should have the opportunity to sample our Newsletter this month with a free copy. Should anyone then wish to become a member, for a modest subscription they will receive our quarterly Newsletter, with articles and reports on activities and ongoing work - and have a say at the A.G.M.

Our Chairman, Mr E.O.Edwards, has written an interesting résumé of the history of the area.

I would be pleased to receive any item of news or information, however small, from our readers.

Thanks to Seymour Morgans for his interesting letter.

Looking forward to the Country Park having an early Spring blossoming.

MEMBERSHIP

Noel Gale
Membership Secretary

Our latest count of Membership for the current year is 255. This is the highest figure reached since our group was formed in 1990, and passes the 250 mark which I aimed to attain this year.

Our new year (2003/2004) will shortly be on us. A Membership Renewal Form can be found on the A.G.M. notice enclosed with your Newsletter.

Having recently lost one or two substantial donations, it was voted unanimously at last year's A.G.M. that, in order to boost our funds, the Annual Family Subscription be increased to £5.

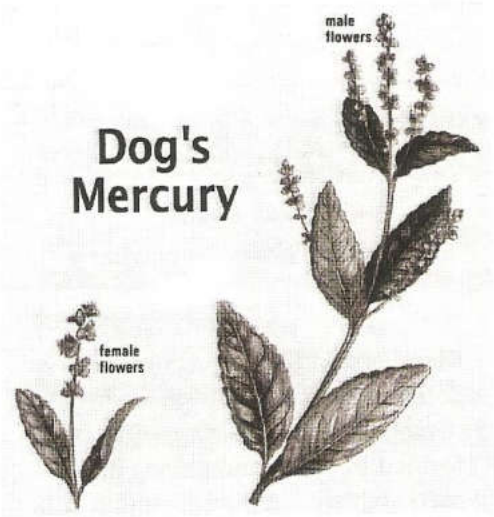
This is the first increase since our group was formed, and I feel that all our members will be in accordance with this decision.

Many thanks for your continued support, and a special welcome to members who have joined us this past year.

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Reserve News

by Mike Wiley
Countryside Warden



It's February the twenty second and a lovely sunny morning as I write this article. Already the first welcoming signs of Spring are here. The **Dog's Mercury** *(mercurialis perennis)* - always the first to flower—is opening its little green tassels of flowers. This plant is very easily overlooked; it grows in hedgerows and woodlands. It is a poisonous plant, and was thought to be no good to man (hence the prefix "dog" - which is a derogatory term).



Another early flower is the **Lesser Celandine** *(ranunculus ficaria)* with its little bright yellow buttercup-like flower. This plant comes with its own little cache of fertiliser in the form of *nitrogen fixing nodules* on its roots.



I have seen the odd **Magpie** carrying sticks (whether to get a fire going or to make a nest, I'm not sure), and I've also noticed a couple of early **Frogs** in the ponds. The harsh croak of the **Raven** flying overhead always makes me glance up. This is a very early bird indeed, and by now it will have raised its brood, thus taking advantage of any animal succumbing to the vagaries of Winter.



Unfortunately, another not so welcome rite of Spring is that the benches from one of the Bird Hides have joined the frogs in the pond !

The Winter work on the Reserve is almost complete …

- The tree plantation (planted some fifteen years ago) alongside the Canal has been thinned.
- Half the hedgerows have been cut. We are experimenting with cutting half the hedges in alternate years, thus giving two years of growth before being cut. This method is said to be better for wildlife, but the drawback will be that the tractor-mounted flail will have two years growth to cut, possibly resulting in a less clean cut.
- The voluntary wardens in the form of **Ted Edwards**, **Howard Davies** and **John Baynham**, have been hard at it checking and cleaning over a hundred Bird Boxes.
- The **Cardiff Conservation Volunteers** have also been busy continuing a programme of coppicing and cutting back a section of **Long Wood**, where the trees overhang the Canal, thus shading it out.
- Finally, the work has commenced on resurfacing the towpath.

All in all, the Reserve is looking well. Not so the periphery, where the building of factories, fast food outlets, superstores, etc. have brought their own problems, with huge amounts of litter everywhere; a large proportion of this litter is plastic and polystyrene packaging, which does not easily break down.

Bottles and cans are another concern. As well as looking unsightly, they are death traps for small mammals, which get in and can't get back out. I have found hundreds of dead mammals in these traps.

Although we have teams of litter pickers from **Amersham / Johnson and Johnson, Keep Wales Tidy** and our own Council staff, we are struggling to cope; the outlying areas of the Nature Reserve are looking grim.

So we intend to hold a Spring Clean on **Sunday 6th April** from **10:00 am** to **12:00 noon**, meeting at the Warden Centre. Your help would be much appreciated, so please try to come along for an hour or two to help with the clean up. Grabs and black bags will be provided for the litter pickers.

A letter from … Mr Seymour Morgans



*The September issue of the Friends Newsletter referred to a tenant of **No 43, Lock House**.*

*As a young lad, I would often see the tenant **Mr Witte** donning a large brimmed white hat, swishing his large net through the long grass and bushes, collecting butterflies and insects from the surrounding fields. To us kids he appeared somewhat eccentric; little did we know that this 'funny old man' was a keen lepidopterist who had sailed the oceans.*

He was short in stature, thickset with a Stalinistic moustache. The locals would refer to him as 'The Old Russian'!

He was also a man with a knowledge of dynamics. By utilizing the fast flowing current of the culvert at the rear, he produced his own electricity to light the cottage.

REVIEW by E.O.Edwards

At the beginning of a new year it's time to consider if anything in the old year calls for action in the coming year.

We have had new members in the past year, some local and some newcomers to the area, who do not know the history of the locality, and how this area has ended up as a Country Park, incorporating within its boundaries a Local Nature Reserve.

I will start in **Merthyr Tydfil** about 1750, where the making of iron was taking off, culminating in four large iron works by 1800.

There was a need for the produce of these great works to be exported all over the world, but the sea was 25 miles away at a little place called Cardiff, where there was a small quay. Its population - 1800; Merthyr had 8000. Permission was granted in 1790 for the building of a **canal from Merthyr to Cardiff**. This was opened in 1794, and during the next four years it was extended down to the sea via a canal basin ending with a sea lock, allowing direct entry for ships up to 200 tons.

Merthyr is 568 feet higher than the sea lock at Cardiff, so 52 locks had to be constructed on the canal to raise the barges that 568 feet.

For the first sixty years the Canal was extremely successful carrying iron, and then coal, peaking to a figure of over 580,000 tons per annum. But the Taff Vale railway was opened in 1841, and this proved to be the death knell for the Canal, and by 1943 trade had ceased. The **Cardiff Corporation** bought the Canal and all its assets for £44,000.



The Canal passed through Whitchurch, and that is the part we are interested in. Section 31 of the sale agreement stated that the Corporation was required to use the canal lands, which included the Canal, lying between the then City boundary (Melingriffith) and Tongwynlais as a public park or pleasure ground.



There must have been a lot of hard work done by local Naturalist groups between 1943 and 1967, when during the Cardiff Naturalists Society Centenary year the area was declared a **Nature Reserve** by Cardiff City Council, who by then owned it due to the City boundary having been extended; by 1970 the Cardiff Parks Department had taken over the management of the Reserve, then in 1981 it was formally declared a Local Nature Reserve.

Forest Farm was also acquired around this time; the buildings, except for the big barn, are leased to the **British Trust for Conservation Volunteers**.

The main part of the Reserve (Longwood, the Canal and Sheep Bane's Wood) has been scheduled as a **Site of Special Scientific Interest** (SSSI) by the Nature Conservancy Council.

It was in 1989 that Chris James, a voluntary warden and Watch leader, floated the idea of a **'Friends Group'**; Chris Powell, Conservation Officer with the City Council, took up the idea, and that was the start of the 'Friends'.

(continued on next page)

Over the years it has grown from a membership of 30 families to over 250, and has been extremely active in promoting improvements in conjunction with the Parks Department. Some of these improvements are:-

Ramps at both the South and North entrances **for wheel-chair and push-chair access**.



Signs with a **map of the Reserve** at five entrances.

Two new **Wetlands areas with a Bird Hide** overlooking each one - and 'wheelchair friendly'

Repairs to canal bank and footpaths.

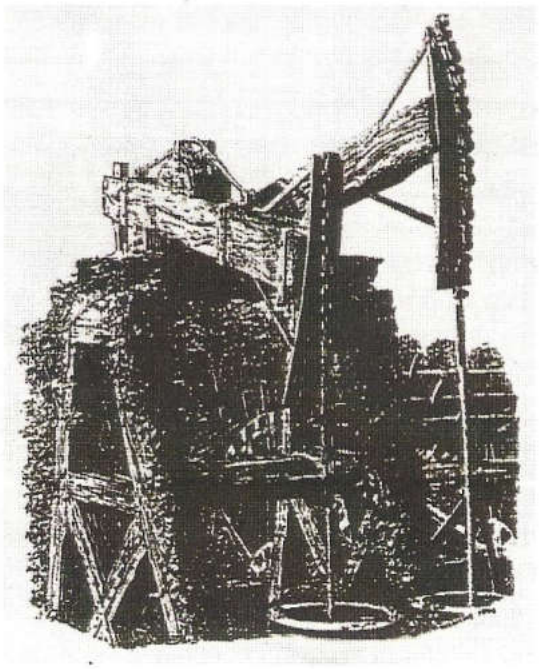
The 'Friends' go for the money (over £50,000 so far), while Mike Wiley and Chris Powell, the Conservation Officer, organise the actual doing of the work. This year our Secretary Dennis Davies has been fighting hard to get a grant from the new Landfill Tax scheme and, thanks to his persistence, a grant is on its way to repair the canal wall using a new method devised by the Waterway Authority, and also to renovate the canal towpath.

In December 1992 this area was confirmed as a **Country Park**, which has an area of over 150 acres. We are still waiting to see how it will develop.

I hope that this account will help newcomers to the area to understand its history, and give some idea of what is happening around them. The 'Friends' quarterly Newsletter will keep you informed, and it's only £5 to join.

Dr Mary Gillham has just published a book, 'A Natural History of Cardiff' A large part of it is devoted to the Reserve and its history. Dr Gillham was one of those who were instrumental in getting the area designated as a Nature Reserve back in 1967, so she certainly knows what she is talking about. I have no hesitation in recommending this book to you.

The Melingriffith Water Pump by E.O.Edwards



The advent of the Millenium should spur enthusiasm to see the Melingriffith Water Pump back in working order.

It was built in 1806 as a consequence of litigation between the **Melingriffith Tinplate Company** and the **Glamorganshire Canal Company** over the availability of water reserves during dry spells. A sum of £600 was made available by the Tinplate works to lift water back into the canal after its power had initially been used through the rolling mills, turbines or water-wheels.

Oxford HouseIndustrial Archaeology Society initially embarked on the preservation of the water-wheel some twenty years ago, in October 1974. At first the project was perceived as a rescue operation preventing it from collapse. It then entered a conservation stage, securing the site and water supply; and, finally, the construction.

The last major stage is to return it to working order. Above all, this requires dedicated people who wish to see the pump and water-wheel turning again.

Reflections and Ghosts ... by Mr N. Dell

How many people have ever thought seriously about the previous occupants of their present homes - especially if those dwellings are almost 200 years old?

*We who live in **Forest Farm Road** have tried to picture what it must have been like to have lived here all those years ago. Built for the employees of the 'Old Melin' works, there are just three of a row of seventeen, once part of a thriving village community.*

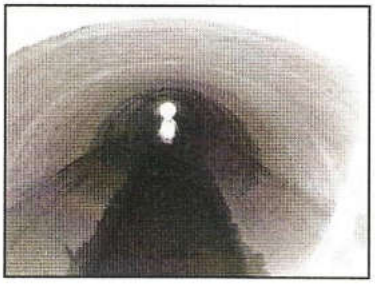
The men who sweated long hours in the heat and dust of the works; the women who toiled at home cooking on open fires; washday with the boiler bubbling away in the scullery; water drawn from the well on the other side of the road; bath night in front of the fire in the ubiquitous 'tin tub'. What of the children? Perhaps they had their excitement in watching the barges plying along the canal and listening to the tales of the bargees and lock-keepers; perhaps the chance of a ride as a bonus.

The evenings would be spent quietly in talk or playing table-top games in the glow of the fire and oil lamps. Heaven be praised - no TV or computers!

But now the once-proud and internationally known Melingriffith Works lies buried beneath a welter of 'semis', whilst the magnificent Canal - once part of the life-blood of Cardiff - is now just a short stretch of water, albeit one of great interest and colour, but suffering the great indignity - emerging from a mere pipe under a motorway!

If the ghosts of the inhabitants of that Melingriffith of old are looking down on us now, we feel sure they shake their heads with great sadness.

They don't deserve to see the fate that has befallen their old community.





RSPB Phoenix Group

Walking through the Longwood area of the Reserve, you will soon see evidence that the group have been active. The main task has been cutting back undergrowth that has completely invaded an open grass / wild flower area; also some much needed coppicing to improve the understory. During both our visits the weather might have been a little kinder; it was rather damp on each occasion.

Nest Boxes have also been checked and cleaned. It was a mixed result; out of fifteen boxes, five were successfully fledged, five not used, two missing and two with dead young, and one with a clutch of seven eggs not hatched.

Big Garden Bird Watch was undertaken on Saturday morning, 25th January; a fair range of woodland birds was recorded, but we missed out on Bullfinch and Siskins, which had been seen that morning.

If anybody, aged 14 years and upwards, would like to help us at any time, please contact me …

Hugh Harrison **Tel: 2070 4889**

How the MELINGRIFFITH got its name by E.O.Edwards

The naming of the new housing estate on the site of the old **Melingriffith Tinplate Works**, 'Milbrook Estate', prompted the Friends to write to the developers to alert them to the historical significance of the name *Melingriffith*.

Since the 12th century, records show a corn mill on the site. In 1158, **Ifor ap Meurig**, Lord of Senghenydd, raided Cardiff Castle and carried off William, the then Earl of Gloucester and Lord of Glamorgan, his wife and son; he forced him to return land and property rightly belonging to Ifor.

It is surmised that it was then that **Griffith**, his son, was given the mill - hence the name Melingriffith - Welsh being the predominating language at the time.

There are recorded references to a **Corn** mill on this site in 1188, 1294, 1316, 1578; the last in 1715 is a record of a **Grist** mill there, leased to William Jenkins of Plasturton.

So we can all be pretty certain that corn milling continued on and off until 1740, when Rees Powell of Llanharan adapted the mill and water courses for **Iron** working.

In 1750 the Melingriffith forge was owned by a Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers who, about 1760, erected an adjoining **Tinplate factory**, assisted by the Hanbury family of Pontypool, who were then the foremost in the art of tinplate working.

The Tinplate works flourished, supplied with iron from the **Pentyrch Ironworks**, brought down initially by barge from a landing stage near Gelynys Farm, along the River Taf and through the lock at Radyr Weir, on to the feeder which took the water from Radyr weir to drive the water wheel at the works. In 1815 this method was replaced by a tram-road to link the ironworks and the mill directly.

The route of this tramroad can still be seen as part of the cycle track which runs alongside the river Taf past Radyr weir.

The Melingriffith works continued working until about 1957, and many many people of Cardiff have either worked there or had relatives working there; the name Melingriffith is part and parcel of Whitchurch, and part of South Wales history.

The developers assured the Friends that the name Millbrook was only for promotional purposes and would disappear once the estate was complete. So let us preserve this link with the past and continue to refer to this area as ***The Melingriffith***.

RSPB Wildlife Explorers

WILDLIFE EXPLORERS … is for children aged 7—12 years.

We are looking for new members;
so if you would like to join, please give me a ring for more details.

Sue Walters Registered Leader Tel: 2075 1760

Annual General Meeting

Wednesday 16th April 2003

The A. G.M. will be preceded by a talk by Mr D.M.Ungersma on "The Story of Cardiff Bay".

This is a talk by an outsider looking at the Bay, and letting us know how the whole project appears to him. It should be very interesting.

Then the A.G.M. will bring you right up to date with all that has been happening in the Country Park during the past year.

E.O.Edwards

Newsletter distribution ..... Help !

Heather Richards, one of our distributors, has recently moved away from Cardiff.

Consequently I am looking for a volunteer who will be willing to deliver approximately fifteen newsletters each quarter in the

Coryton Rise / Lon-y-Celyn area of Whitchurch.

Anyone who can help please give me a ring …

Noel Gale Tel. 2091 5665

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