FRIENDS

OF FOREST FARM COUNTRY PARK
AND GLAMORGANSHIRE CANAL
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE
WEBSITE REF: www.forestfarm.org.uk

ISSUE 62 DECEMBER 2006

EDITOR'S FORUM

by Sheila Austin

Well here I am writing an editorial for the December Newsletter. Although it is still early November as I write this, if we didn't already know by the recent frosty mornings that Winter is approaching, we certainly would by the shops where Christmas shopping is well under way.

The 'Friends' seasonal purchase is some seed for the birds of Forest Farm—the number and variety of which continue to delight as we see from the monthly walks around the Reserve.

Another way of 'doing something' for Forest Farm is participation in the monthly clearing, planting and cleaning of our patch organised by the RSPB Cardiff Conservation Group. Volunteers for this and other projects are always most welcome and much valued. Don't forget our Chairman is compiling a list of potential volunteers to be contacted about possible availability as and when needed for forthcoming projects.

I am delighted that the article about the narrow gauge railway in the last edition of the Newsletter generated a couple of articles about the Melingriffiths Tin Works from Eric Tucker and Les Gibbon. Also, it is a great pleasure to be able to publish a reader's letter (from Chris Jones) suggesting a focus on a different aspect of Forest Farm … and, talking of different aspects, this time there is an article about the River Taff and some information about a dormouse in the Reserve.

So I hope you enjoy reading this edition, making a brief respite from the forthcoming Christmas preparations. I look forward to receiving any thoughts—short (or longer) articles, letters and comments. In the meantime I wish you all the very best for Christmas and the New Year.

Contributions for the next letter to reach the Editor by 6th February 2007.

Editor: **Mrs Sheila Austin, 1 Heol Gwrgan, Whitchurch, Cardiff, CF14 1PP**

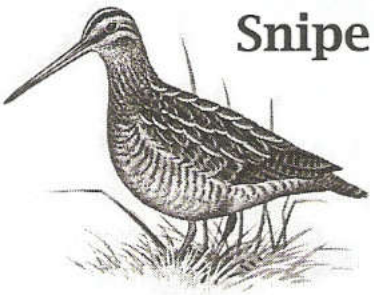
or email to: albynaustin@ndsl.org.uk

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Reserve News

Mike Wiley Countryside Warden

It's November 5th and my article is due tomorrow. As usual it's a last minute rush to miss the deadline! We have been experiencing a few very cold days with heavy frosts, after an extremely wet Autumn. All in all, the Reserve is looking good, with the bird numbers being variable. A **Green Sandpiper** hung around for a couple of days on its passage through in late Summer, and a keen photographer happened to be in the hide and was able to take some great shots, which he kindly handed over to me. The winter birds are starting to move in, with sightings of **Water Rail** and **Snipe** on the wetlands and small flocks of **Siskin** feeding in the Alders. As yet we haven't received any sightings of winter **Thrushes**, but it's early days, and their numbers will obviously depend upon the severity of the Winter. I keep being asked when we will be starting our winter feeding programme. The answer is 'any time now'. **Ted Edwards**, the Friends' former Chairman, has ordered the seed—very kindly paid for by Friends' donations. As soon as it arrives we will begin feeding, and continue throughout the Winter.



Snipe

Some of the planned work on the Reserve is also being funded by the Friends:

1) Surfacing the 60 odd metres of footpath from the little wooden bridge over the Canal up to Long Wood. Being on a slope, this is a particularly muddy section.

2) The horse route/footpath through the middle section of the Reserve (i.e. the section between Longwood Drive and the M4).

3) Some more revetment work using pre-planted coir rolls along the more eroded parts of the Canal towpath.

All these improvement works will be taking place in the New Year.

One of our voluntary wardens, **Howard Davies**, came to see me recently, telling me that a local resident, **Mr Phil Meek**, had seen a **Dormouse** on the Reserve. Phil had related the sighting to a friend, who had subsequently told Howard. The version I got was that Phil had seen the dormouse entering a nest; he had then put his finger into the nest hole and was bitten. He had then retrieved his finger with the dormouse still attached. If this story was true it would be a very important find and the first record of this mammal being seen here. I've known Phil for a number of years and I know him to be a good all-round naturalist, so a few days later I called round to see him to ask if there was any truth in the tale. He told me that only part of the story was true, but he had definitely seen a dormouse here. I dare say that by the time this story does the rounds it will sound something like this ...



Common Dormouse

"Phil was strolling along a woodland ride one morning minding his own business when he was set upon by a ferocious dormouse beating him to the ground in an unprovoked attack. Scrambling to his feet he managed to run off, and was lucky to escape with his life."

However, Phil said he was willing to take me to the exact spot where he had spotted the dormouse. He told me he had only been a couple of feet away from it, and had a good view of the little creature. He then went on to describe the dormouse, detailing its size, colour, long whiskers and bushy tail etc. The description he gave matched that of a dormouse exactly. After looking at the site we spent an unfruitful (sorry about the pun) hour searching for evidence, i.e. hazelnuts that had been opened in a specific way. A neat spherical hole is made with a smooth inner lip and with teeth marks on the outer rim running about 45 degrees to the hole. This beautiful, shy little animal isn't at all common. Being nocturnal, it is extremely difficult to see, so the chance of finding one is remote. That said, I believe that Phil did see a dormouse, so that any future management of the area will be sympathetically carried out with the needs of dormice in mind. Dormice are of course a protected species; a licence is required to handle them.

The Editor recently handed me a card from **Mrs Chris Jones** of Rhiwbina in which she said, "I would be very interested if some 'expert' could feature an article on the beautiful and unusual flowers of the Reserve. I've noticed some wonderful orchids and vetch-type plants; I would love to know their names. The Reserve is a wonderful place and a huge asset to us all."

In reply to her card ... it's difficult to know which vetch is alluded to, as there are several species of vetch growing on the Reserve, the brightest and showiest of which is the **Tufted Vetch (Vicia cracca)**. It's a sprawling perennial with lots of bright blue pea-like flowers on a one-sided raceme. As for the orchids, we have at least five species ...

1) Common spotted orchid (Dactylorhiza fuchsia).
2) Southern marsh orchid (Dactylorhiza praetermissa).
3) Common twayblade (Listera ovata).
4) Bee orchid (Ophrys apifera).
5) Broad leaved helleborine (Epipactis helleborine).

I'd like to suggest that Mrs Jones, or anyone else interested in the flora and fauna of the Reserve, should join us on one of our guided walks around the Country Park and Nature Reserve. It's far easier to identify a flower when it's in front of you. A list of the walks can be found in the council's walks programme, or inside the Friends' membership card.

Mike Wiley Countryside Warden

RSPB CARDIFF CONSERVATION GROUP

Doing Something Positive

September 9th saw us back on our patch ready to tackle the Balsam. The amount of growth and spread of this invasive weed was rather overwhelming large areas, being over six feet high. On the plus side, you were able to see the area we had cut in June—the growth was very much stunted. For our morning effort we cleared roughly about a third of the area by pulling and cutting. Being a succulent plant, it will eventually die back—only to reappear in the Spring; when the seed is ripe they explode, scattering their seed. Children love this plant; you only need to touch it, and—pop—the seed is exploding into the air.

Our task for October was not another blitz on the Balsam, as the seed was too ripe to touch. So the job in hand was to clear bramble and scrub so that we will be able to plant a boundary hedge between the Reserve and the road. We were a somewhat depleted group—only three of us—nevertheless the job was completed.

Programme for 2006/2007

December 9th	General clearing / dead wood.	Middle entrance.
January 13th	Hedge planting.	Middle entrance.
February 10th	Clearing bramble / scrub.	Top entrance.
March 10th	BIG LITTER PICK / clean our patch.	Middle entrance.

The group meets on a **Saturday** morning from **10.30 to 12.30** at **Forest Farm, Longwood Drive, Whitchurch**. It is not particularly strenuous work—similar to an active gardener (you work to your own level).

If you feel you would like to get involved, just turn up or, better still, give me a ring ...

Hugh Harrison 029 2070 4889

MEMBERSHIP N.J. Gale Membership Secretary

Our latest Membership count is **287** Families plus **1** Group. This figure is just 2 short of last year's record number. With a few more renewals still to come in, plus new members continually joining us, we might well reach the 300 mark by the end of March.

Thank you all for your continued support.

(*From the Editor*) Just a note to remind you that the Membership Fee is only **£5** per household—excellent value for money!

BIG GARDEN BIRD WATCH 27th to 28th January 2007

With all the recent news concerning Global Warming, it is important that we are aware of any changes to our local environment. Our gardens and parks are becoming important wildlife areas and, by recording visitors to our gardens, the RSPB can monitor any changes to species. Last year more than 470,000 spent one hour recording visitors to their gardens and parks.

The top five birds recorded in January 2006 were …

1) **House Sparrow**

There were an average of 4.4 sparrows per garden. Although they stay at the top of the table, house sparrow numbers fell again this year, increasing their long-term decline to 56% since 1979.

2) **Starling**

An average of 3.64 starlings per garden, and a decline of 76% since 1979. Starlings are noisy characters usually seen foraging in small flocks. In winter, migrant starlings from northern Europe join the resident birds and form huge flocks at regular roosts.

3) **Blackbird**

An average of 3 per garden, and an increase of 24% since last year. In winter migrant blackbirds from northern Europe join our residents.

4) **Blue Tit**

An average of 2.7 per garden, and an increase of 12% since 1979. An agile bird, the blue tit is most often seen flitting onto bird feeders. In winter, family flocks of blue tits are joined by Great Tits, Long-tailed Tits and other woodland species, as they search for food.

5) **Chaffinch**

An average of 2 per garden, and a 30% increase since 2005. The chaffinch has moved back up to 5th after dropping to 6th in 2005. In winter, migrant chaffinches from Scandinavia and Northern Europe join our resident birds. The cold weather there this year could explain the large rise in numbers in 2006.

Enclosed is a form for you to record visitors to your garden.

Martin Chamberlain

MONTHLY FRIENDS / RSPB WALK

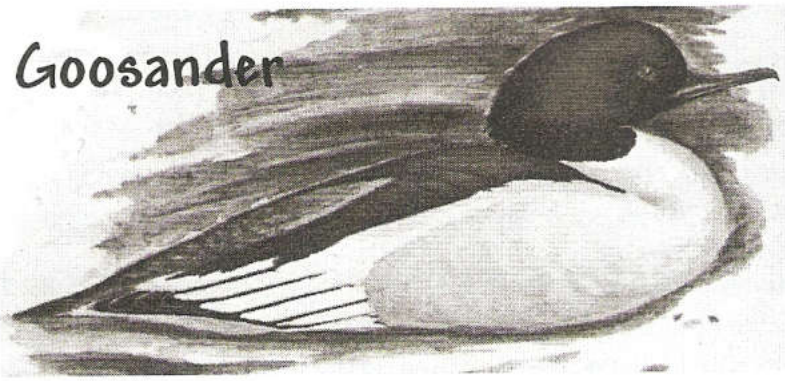
Phil Baker

Our joint Friends of Forest Farm Nature Reserve / RSPB monthly walks continue to attract new people for our gentle stroll around the Reserve, observing the varied birds and other wildlife.



August is always a "quiet" month for wildlife and, with many regular walkers on holiday, it is hard to predict what we will find. However, 15 people turned up on a somewhat cloudy but dry day, and we managed a total of 27 species—all in all, a satisfying morning. The highlight was a whole family of **Nuthatches** feeding on a dead tree alongside the Canal. Summer migrants detected were **Blackcap**, **Chiffchaff** and **House Martin**.

For the September walk, 26 people, including 6 children, assembled on a fine sunny day. Most migrants had disappeared by now, although a **Chiffchaff** was spotted (increasingly these are now "over-wintering", so we may get some staying—we'll have to look and listen for them). A notable highlight this month was a male **Goosander** in eclipse plumage on a rock in the river. It seemed to spend a lot of time preening, and it looked as if either it had an injured wing or some other trouble with its wing feathers, as one looked out of place. We also had good views of **Kingfisher** on the river, and also from the hides. The **Dipper** was back, splashing in the much lower level of the river as it walked into and out of the water, feeding—a good demonstration of one of the species' characteristics. As the water was so shallow, we could see it walking on the river bed. To round off the highlights, we saw 3 or 4 **Buzzards** (a family group?) soaring and circling, being mobbed by a flock of **Carrion Crows**.



A beautiful clear sky with plenty of sun awaited us in October, with a nice group of 4 **Mistle Thrush** at the top of a tree to start with. We headed off to the river, which was running high, so not much to be seen, and continued up to the Weir, hoping for a glimpse of the Salmon working their way upstream. There were no fish to be seen, however, so we walked on to the Reserve.

It seemed very quiet, but at the first hide we caught a glimpse of **Kingfisher**, an early **Snipe** and a lone **Dabchick (Little Grebe)**. A female **Blackcap** was also spied. **Jays** were present, no doubt collecting the large numbers of acorns that were around. A **Grey Wagtail** was seen, not as usual by the river, but near the Canal. All in all, a pleasant day for the 18 people (including 3 children) who came along, with a total species count of 24.

As we head into Autumn, who knows what may turn up, so why not join us and enjoy your local Nature Reserve? We meet at 10 a.m. on the third Saturday of every month, near the warden's hut; everyone is welcome.

The GREAT FLYWHEEL at MELINGRIFFITH TINPLATE WORKS

This photograph was taken at its installation—around 1850.

The wheel weighed 120 tons, was 36 feet in diameter, and revolved at 60 m.p.h. It was believed to be the second largest wheel in the world.

Sitting at the front is the Manager of the works, **Mr John Thomas**, and his wife. They lived at Oak Cottage, Whitchurch.

Les Gibbon



NARROW GAUGE RAILWAY

Eric Tucker

After reading the article on the narrow gauge railway in the September issue of Friends, I believe I may have an explanation for its existence. During the 1930's the area in question, which we children of that period called the Line woods, was the area from just below Forest Farm to roughly where the footbridge across the river is today.

At that time the wood was quite dense with trees, bushes and near the river quite a lot of Japanese Knotweed, and you had to know your way through it.

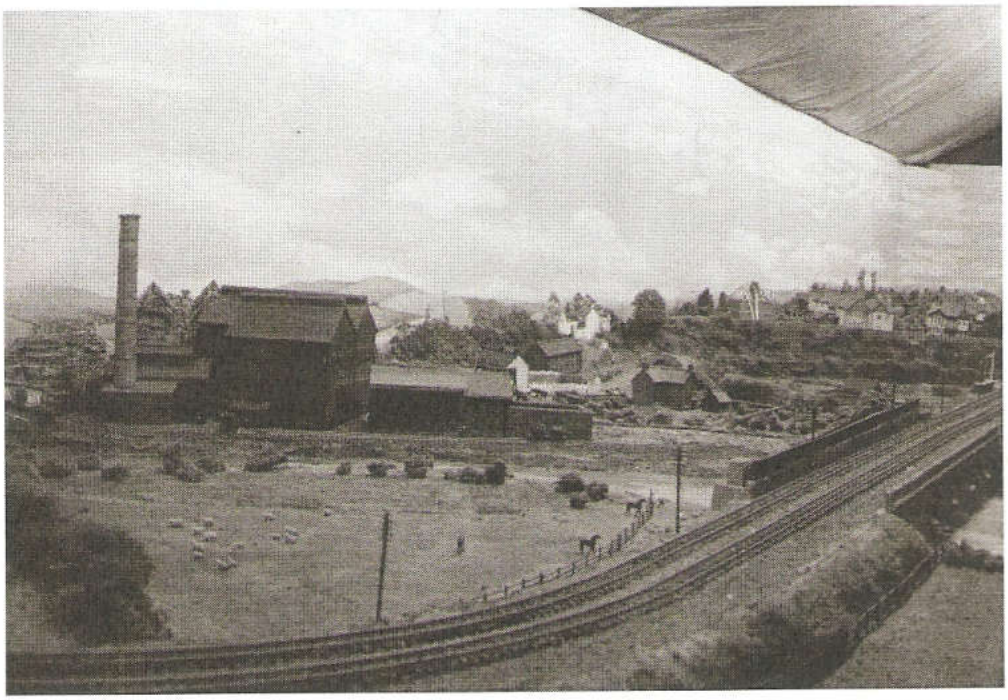
It was quite a popular play area where we would, in summer, make dens. This was usually by digging a pit and covering it with knotweed. The soil in that area was very soft, consisting mainly of fine sand and coal dust, the latter probably deposited when the river overflowed. The river during that period carried a lot of coal dust.

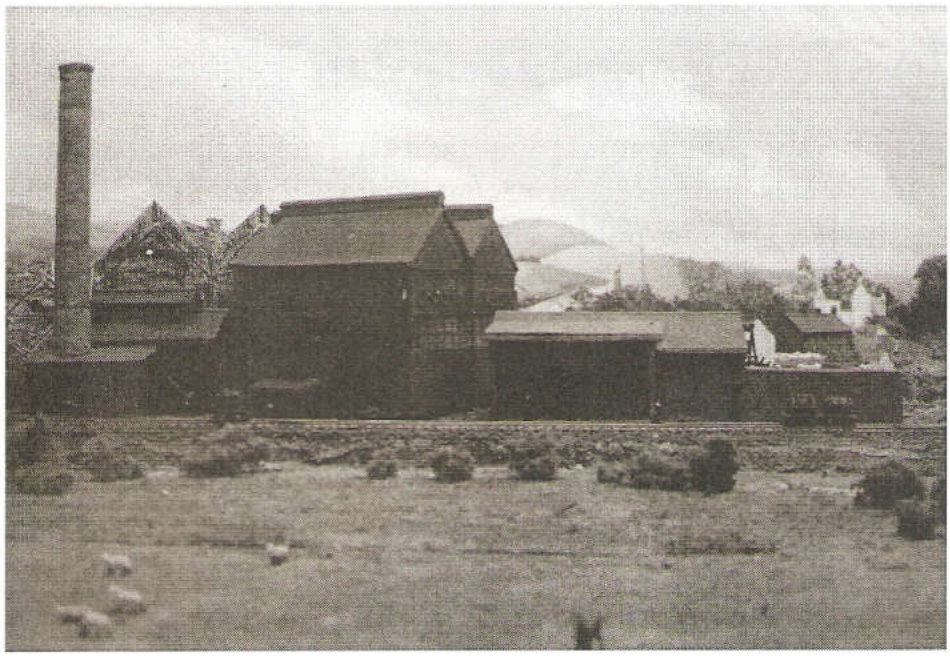
It is noticeable today that this area is very open, although it is starting to fill again. The reason for this was that during the 60's or 70's (I'm not sure which), due to spontaneous combustion the ground in that area started to burn, destroying most of the plant life. This is not something soil would normally do.

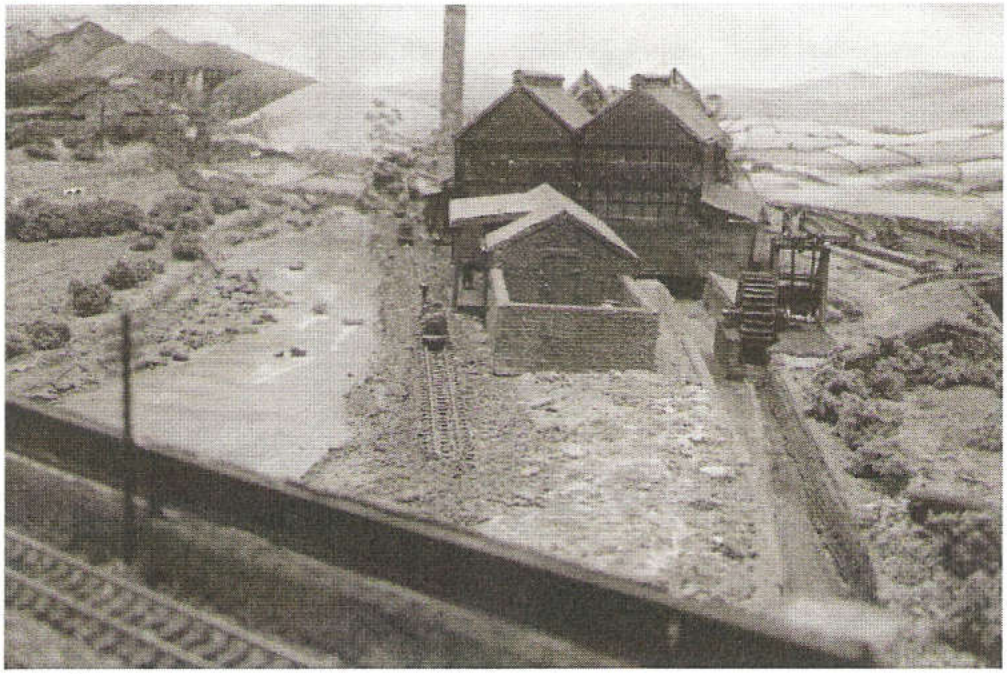
It is my belief that when Melingriffith Tin Works initially started production, the waste from the furnaces and other processes was transported via the narrow gauge line to that area and dumped. This must have stopped in the late 19th century in order that the area would be as it was in the late 1920's and 30's.

After this time the waste was deposited at the other end of the works towards the railway bridge over the river Taff, the waste being carried along a narrow gauge railway.

I enclose a picture showing what that probably looked like from a model I built some years ago. It would be interesting to know where the line that was discovered terminated.







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Good quality. All with **FRIENDS OF FOREST FARM** logo. All profits go to Reserve projects.

Contact: **JOHN HARDING** (CHAIRMAN) **029 2056 3874**

TALES of the RIVER BANK—III

Being fortunate enough to be able to commute via the Taff Trail, I have been able to observe how the water quality has improved in recent years. In Edgar Chappell's "Old Whitchurch" book published in 1945 he noted

"From the Middle Ages down to the period of intense collieries developments in the valleys, the River Taff was known to be a prolific haunt of Salmon, Sewin and Trout, and the fisheries were a source of substantial income to the various manorial Lords. At Radyr Weir the Melingriffiths Company had an elaborate underground fishery (remains of which still exist), where Salmon were trapped at weekends and collected and removed on Trams on Monday mornings."

One of our members, **Kelvin Dean**, recently took some photographs of salmon jumping at Radyr Weir. After many years of neglect the River Taff is returning to its former glory.

This photograph, as well as others, have been included in our website by our webmaster **David Bevan**.

Martin Chamberlain (m.chamberlain1@ntlworld.com)



EVENTS at FOREST FARM

Bird Walks at **Forest Farm**. Meet at the **Warden's Centre**, **Forest Farm**.

Led by Phil Baker, Friends of Forest Farm and RSPB Cardiff. Distance 4 km.

The **third Saturday** of the month at **10.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.** **Free**.

A guided walk to identify local birds. Bring binoculars if you have them.

The next walk is on ~~December 16th~~ March 17th.

Wildlife Watch at Forest Farm. Meet at the **Warden's Centre**, **Forest Farm**.

For children of ages 5 to 12. There is a small charge for materials.

Led by the Park Ranger Service. Monthly on **Saturdays** at **10.00 a.m.** to **12.00 p.m.**

A range of activities—bird watching, tracking mammals, identifying trees & flowers.

The next meeting is on ~~December 16th~~ March 31st.

For details or future programme of events, ring the Park Rangers on **029 2044 5900**.

WINTER BIRDS ON THE RESERVE. Meet at the **Warden's Centre**, **Forest Farm**.

Led by Mike Wiley and Chris James. Free. Distance 4 km.

Sunday, **December 10th** at **10.00 a.m.** to **12.00 p.m.**

We will be hoping to see some of the birds that over winter here with us, along with our resident birds. Wrap up warm for this event and bring binoculars if you have them.

MEETINGS

These are held in

Whitchurch Community Centre, **Tyn y Pwll Road**, **Whitchurch**

on **Wednesdays** at **7.30 p.m.**

10th January 2007	**'Keeping Bees'**. An illustrated talk about this fascinating subject by **Mr John Verran**, Regional Bee Inspector for Wales.
14th March 2007	* An illustrated talk by a speaker from the **Glamorgan and Gwent Archaeological Trust**.
11th April 2007	* A talk followed by a cup of tea, then the **Annual General Meeting**. * Subjects to be announced.

Projects for 2007 - an update John Harding (Chairman)

Project 1 - We are going to lay a stone dust path (approx. 70 metres) from the Canal bridge (central lock) to Lockwood. The stone dust will be tipped near the lock. We will need several volunteers to wheelbarrow it over the bridge and tip it along the pathway.

Project 2 - To resurface the path at the middle section (approx. 150 metres) here we will need volunteers to help rake it level.

Both these projects should be undertaken around March—April 2007.

More about ***Project 3*** - revetment repairs to the Canal bank and ***Project 4*** - the dipping pond next time.

The council will be removing some of the metal hoops to allow better access for motorised buggies. This, I believe, will be started quite soon, possibly by the time this Newsletter is printed.

BIRD FEED WINTER 2006-7

We have had the first half of the bird feed delivered. I would like to thank our past Chairman, **Ted** Edwards, for arranging ordering and delivery, also all those who sent donations towards the bird feed. You can still donate if you wish; send a cheque, payable to **Friends of Forest Farm** (write ***'Bird Feed'*** on the back) to myself:

Mr John Harding, 63 Fairwater Grove, Llandaff, Cardiff, CF5 2JN

Chairman's comments on recent Friends' activities ...

Foods of the Forest (October 2006) - there was quite a good turnout for this event. We left as a group and walked towards the gate by the pond, where we stopped and listened to a good talk on foods of the forest by one of the rangers. I had thought we would be taking a stroll around the Reserve but, to my disappointment, we went straight back to the Warden's Centre. Waiting there for us (as always) was some FANTASTIC FOOD, good company and a very good evening.

Wednesday 8th November Evening Meeting - a talk on *Coral Reefs around the World* by **Mr Peter Rees**, a local Pharmacist. Not only was there underwater photography of the living creatures on and around the reef, but pictures taken above the water showing the surrounding area and different terrain. It was a great evening, as I'm sure those who were there will agree.

Layout by **Robin Sotheby**

Published on behalf of **The Friends of Forest Farm and Glamorganshire Canal Local Nature Reserve** by

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