Wildlife by the Month in our churchyards

All our 'wildlife of the month' posts in one place

Online at https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/16602/

Every month (more or less) we post something topical about wildlife (and sometimes a bit of history) in and around St James's churchyards. We are mixing years together to build up a month-by-month picture of the churchyards. For no particular reason, we started in May…

Wildlife by the Month in our churchyards

MAY

Dandelions

Medicines: the dandelion's scientific name, *Taraxicum officinale*. comes from old Arabic *tarashaquq*, first mentioned in a book on pharmacy, and *officinale* because it was kept as a medicine by medieval monks.

Lion's teeth: 'dandelion' comes from the French *dents de lion*, describing its leaves. The modern French name pisenlit – refers to one of its medicinal properties.

Nectar: Dandelion flowers are an important early source of nectar for bees, butterflies and other pollinators, hungry after winter hibernation.

Food and drink: Lots of animals, including people, eat dandelions.

- The leaves were used in Victorian salads (blanche them to remove bitterness) and fermented for dandelion and burdock;
- the flower petals are used in dandelion wine (best if collected on May Day);
- and the roots can be ground and used as a coffee substitute.

Fruit ripener: Dandelions also release ethylene, used commercially to ripen fruit, and they used to be planted in English orchards to do just that.

Rubber: The white sap is latex: The Kazakh dandelion produces so much white latex that it is used to make rubber. British dandelions don't produce so much but have been used as a natural, soothing sticking plaster on cuts and sores.

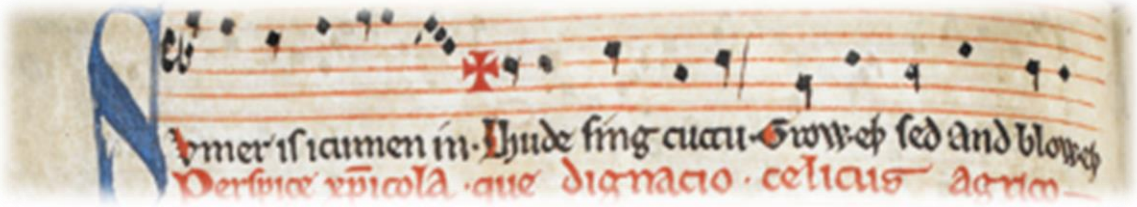
Wishes? Dandelion seed heads have long been used to make wishes. All you have to do is blow and make a wish (note: it often doesn't work). The seed parachutes spin, giving them extra lift, so the seeds travel larger distances.

Are the dandelions on your lawn just weeds?

or important food for the pollinators?

– or perhaps a glorious meadow of wishes waiting to be made?

Cuckoos and cockchafers



The first verse of the oldest song written down in English dates from around 1260, and begins with:

Sumer is icumen in	*Summer is a-coming in*
Lhude sing cuccu	*Loudly sing cuckoo*
Groweþ sed	*Groweth seed*
and bloweþ med	*And bloometh meadow*
And springeþ þe wde nu	*And springeth the wood now*
Sing cuccu!	*Sing cuckoo!*

Interestingly, the music has not only these English words but Latin lyrics about Good Friday – adding a semblance of religious propriety to the English song that is may be a bit rude in the second verse, depending on how you translate *bucke uerteþ*.

And there are lots of (apparently county-specific) versions of the children's folk-rhyme that I learnt in Kent as:

The cuckoo comes in April
He sings his song in May
In the middle of June,
He changes his tune
And in July he flies away.

You are unlikely to see a cuckoo in the churchyard, and while you might see one flying past (their barred underside, long tails and wing shape make them look a bit like plump sparrowhawks), you are more likely to hear one as his song echoes along the Welland valley. The rhyme, by the way, is correct: cuckoos do arrive in late April, having migrated from the Congo. And after establishing a territory, it's the males who sing the distinctive cuckoo call (a slightly mournful descending minor third) while the female's calls are more burbling. The female then, famously, lays her eggs, one in each of several different nests of other birds. Her young are

hatched and raised by the birds who made the nest, often dunnocks (hedge sparrows) or other small birds who are quickly outgrown by the cuckoo chick.

As the rhyme says, from June onwards, the male's calls can change – maybe to a happier major third, or perhaps even going up rather than down (although sometimes this is young males practising getting it wrong). The adults migrate back to Africa in July, and the new young wait until August to fly off - perhaps to meet, for the first time, their parents. Climate change has caused local birds to move their nesting to a week or so earlier in the year than in the past, so the cuckoo's arrival here is out of synch with the hedgerow birds whose nests they parasitise. This is one of the reasons for the decline in cuckoos' numbers in England, although some seem to have moved north to Scotland, where spring is later, and cuckoo numbers have actually increased.

While you might not see a cuckoo, in damper areas of the churchyard you will see cuckoo flowers, or lady's smocks, with their pretty, delicate pink flowers and narrow leaves at the base. They get their name from their appearance at around the same time as the cuckoos arrive.

The leaves are edible not only to us (they taste a bit like water cress), but to the speckled green caterpillars of orange tip butterflies, who love both cuckoo flowers and garlic mustard also found this month (along with wild garlic or ramsons – both edible to us) in the churchyard. Orange tip adults have been about since the beginning of April, having over-wintered as pupae.

You might sometimes see 'cuckoo spit' on cuckoo flowers and other plants in the churchyard (here it's on some cleavers). The froth is produced by baby (nymph) frog hoppers, and acts like bubble-wrap to protect them from cold nights and parasitic wasps. If you investigate the 'spittle' you will find a little green nymph sitting in its bubble bath, sucking in the plant's soapy sap, and then blowing the bubbles it out of its bottom (we've all done it).

We also have cuckoo pint in the churchyard, also known as Lords and Ladies and a whole load of other names. The leaves of this native lily have been pushing through since late March, but in May its hooded, white-turning-red flowers should be showing. The 'cuckoo' part of its name obviously comes from the time of year, and we will simply note that 'pint' (or 'pintel') is a Middle English… ahem… anatomical term.

Which brings us to cockchafers, who have no cuckoo links but are also called May bugs because it's from May onwards that you will see and hear them zooming loudly about at night, banging into windows or even your head (one thwacked into my head in the churchyard the other night). Hence their other name – doodlebugs, although I'm not sure which came first, the doodlebug name or the V1 rocket.

They are Europe's largest beetles, related to the famous Egyptian scarab beetles. While the chafer part of their name comes from an old English word for gnawing, the cock bit allegedly refers their fan-like antennae, that, when opened out, look like the comb on a cockerel's head. I suspect it more likely comes from their cockerel-like behaviour and the way they strut about. Anyhow, you can tell the males from females by the numbers of segments on the combs (seven for a boy and six for a girl), although a lot of the time they are folded up into clubs (as in this picture). While the adults eat leaves and are pretty harmless, the larvae (fat white grubs with brown heads) eat the roots of grasses and other plants and can do lots of damage to crops. However, these grubs, along with earthworms, are a favourite food of both badgers and moles – both of which munch happily on the grubs in the churchyard. Apparently (unlike cuckoo flowers, wild garlic and garlic mustard, I've not tried this) the grubs taste fine as a soup or when fried lightly in butter...

The churchyard at night

We've had some night camera traps out in the upper churchyard, to see what's about after dark. And we've also been out checking on the bats.

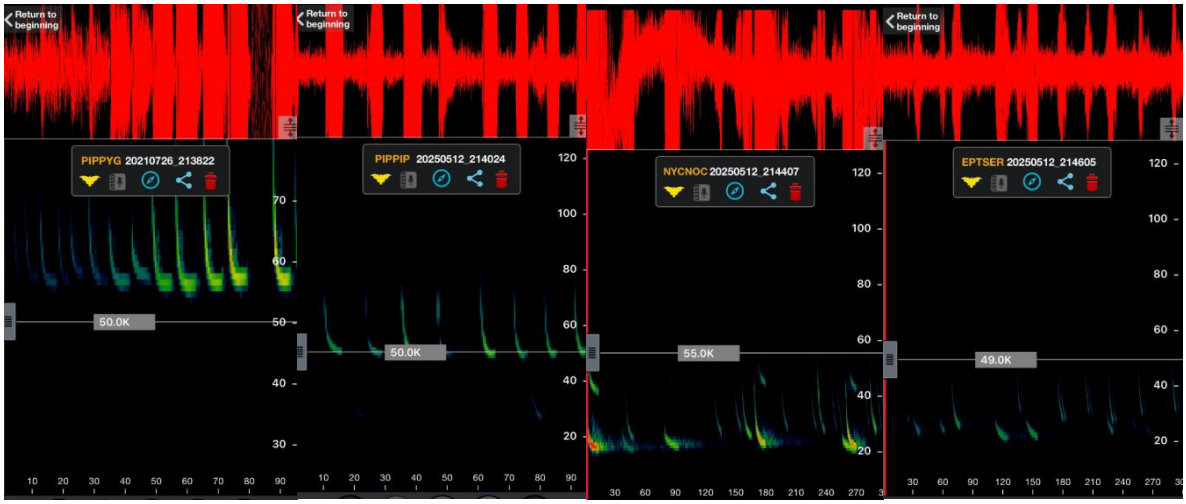
The camera traps picked up badgers, foxes and muntjac deer. All three are common around the village, of course, although as they are out mainly at night, we don't necessarily see them very often.

Badgers are frequent visitors to the churchyard, where they enjoy the various grubs (eg cockchafer larvae) and worms that are so abundant our in grass-covered soil. We've discussed before (see March notes) how their presence may be why we don't see hedgehogs in the churchyard, even though they are so common elsewhere around the village.

Not seen quite so frequently – probably because there's not so much food for them in the churchyard - are foxes. Having said which, like the badgers, they also eat grubs and worms. Maybe, though, they also occasionally catch a church vole or mouse. Our foxes seem pretty healthy, probabably beause they are nothing like as as densely packed here as in cities and towns, where, although they have plenty to eat - rubbish to scavenge - they are particularly prone to getting a range of infectious diseases, such as scabies, a mite that's transmitted by very close contact.

The most common animals picked up on the cameras, though, were muntjacs– both males and females, and maybe some youngsters. Reeves's Muntjac are small deer, the size of a largeish dog, found wild in parts of China, but imported to Woburn in the early 20th Century. Through a mixture of deliberate releases and escapes, they are now found over much of England and South Wales (similar stories apply to some other European countries). They are usually solitary, sometimes in small family groups but, unlike the native roe deer seen in the valley below the church and on the way to Corby, don't form herds. And, unlike most deer, they breed all year ound - doubtless part of their success. Another name for them is 'barking deer', and you will often hear them barking at night. Their hind quarters are higher than their shoulders, and up close, you can see the male's horns (the buck in the photo has lost one), their large canine teeth and the dark scent glands on their faces. Because they are an non-native, invasive species, it is illegal to keep them, except under licence, or release them to the wild (injured ones at rescue centres are nearly always put down). They browse and damage the shrub layer in woodland, impacting on wild woodland flowers and nesting sites for birds such as the already rare nightingales.

Not picked up by the cameras, but easily seen on a evening walk, are bats. The summer bat roost in the church porch, while still not as active as it was a few years ago, survives, as evidenced by the fresh bat poo on the wall and floor. We've not managed to see many coming in and out, but there's plenty of bats of different sizes to be seen in the churchyard, along church gap and on the village green. The different species, like birds, can be identified from their calls, although unlike in birds the purpose of these is echolocation (navigation) not territoriality or courtship. To hear these high frequency calls you need a special detector that slows them down to within human hearing range: these calls can also be made into 'sonograms'. In less than an hour, one evening last week, we detected common and soprano pipistrelles (the church porch roost is largely soprano pipistrelles), noctules and serotines.



Sonograms of (left-to-right)a soprano pipistrelle, common pipistrelle, noctule and a serotine bat

Long eared bats (or whispering bats) have also been seen but are difficult to detect as their echolocation signals are so quiet (which is why they have such big ears!). All the bats eat flying insects – you will sometimes see noctules trying to keep up with swifts on a late summer's evening, especially if ants are flying. Pipistrelles (the smallest of those seen, and common in gardens and over fields) eat around 3000 midges and mosquitoes each night. So more bats is definitely a good thing!

JUNE

Swifts

There are two types of swifts flying around the churchyard and village in June: one is the bird and the other is a moth.

Swifts hunting insects

These wonderful, screaming, bow-like birds are back from Africa and building their nests. Swift numbers in the UK have halved over the last 20 years - partly through a reduction in insects to eat, partly disruption to migration routes across and up from Africa, but also a lack of places to nest as we block the holes under our eaves where they build their nests.

Swifts only land to nest; they sleep and mate in flight. Their nests are of air-borne strands of plant material, bound together with saliva.

Fledglings jump from the nest - and don't land again for several years. If they do crash-land they need help as they can't take off from the ground until much older (and even then it's difficult – if you see a grounded swift then simply pick it up and help it back into the air).

Our other swifts are more active at, and just after, dusk. These are the common swift moths. The adults fly in May and June, the females hovering to lay their eggs, which drop to the ground. The small white caterpillars hatch in July and tunnel underground, to spend the summer and winter eating the roots of grasses. They pupate the following April, and new adults emerge in May and June.

Common swift moth

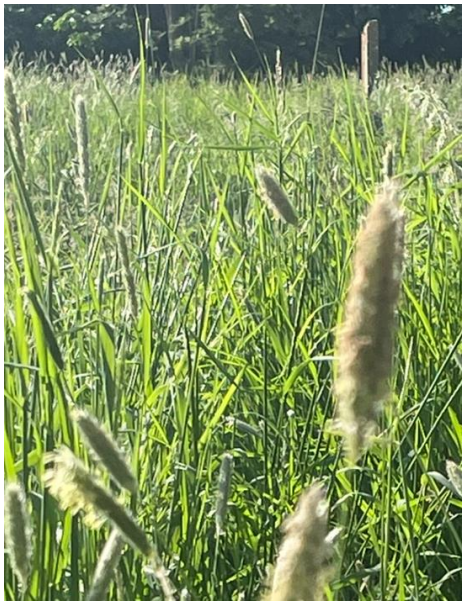
Unlike most adult moths who drink nectar, adult swift moths have no mouthparts and so cannot feed…

A morning's walk

At about eight o'clock on a sunny morning, the churchyard was literally wonderful.

Like an orchestra warming up, the birds were loudly singing over each other: house sparrows chattered and squabbled in the hedges; a blackbird sang a rich operatic aria; wrens were piccolo trilling; a robin sang his melancholic ballad in a minor key; blue tits shrilled 'tsee-tsee-tsee', and a great tit occasionally shouted 'teacher!'; an innumerate song thrush, like a child practicing on a recorder, was repeating melodic phrases, sometimes twice and sometimes four times but rarely the traditional three; and above them all, a lone blackcap warbled a waterfall. The cawing rooks and the ' Jack! Jack!'-ing jackdaws were arguing, while the dismayed woodpigeons cooed woo-WOO-woo woo-woo (to the rhythm of 'we've ALL gone bonkers') and the collared doves gently replied woo-WOO-woo ('I TOLD you'). An indistinct chiff-chaff chanted its name.

Overhead the swallows, house martins and swifts – all recently flown in from Africa and now with nests and young to care for - hunted the morning insects rising up from the long grass and trees. The tall meadow foxtail grass, swayed with the breeze. Among the grass was an occasional yellow rattle, just starting to flower. This is an important native meadow plant, deliberately seeded, as it parasitises grass roots and allows other wildflowers the space to grow and bloom. It's also host to the caterpillars of several moths, that in turn feed the birds and bats. This morning, the swallows and martins were swooping low, and above them the swifts. Swifts are surely the most magical of birds, scything the sky before swooping up to their nests in the eaves of village houses. This is the only time



each year that they land; the rest of the time they eat and sleep on the wing, often above the clouds. How honoured we should be that each year they fly from East Africa, across to Congo, turn right towards the Mediterranean, then up through Portugal or France, to Gretton. A journey of three and a half thousand miles, as their ancestors did before them, to refurbish last years' nest and raise their young in a gap just above our upstairs windows.

A large, silver-headed red kite was leisurely gliding the thermals even higher up, and a harassed buzzard flapped doggedly over the lime trees, twisting to avoid the acrobatic jackdaws chasing it.

The cow parsley is now past its best but still there in the shaded areas. The hogweed is starting to flower and will provide the white umbrellas of the rest of summer. It's apparently called cow parsley because it was used to feed cows. Hogweed, which is taller, gets its name from being used to feed pigs (the village used to have a pig club, and I may be writing this in what used to be a pigsty – very apt some might say).

People always worry about giant hogweed but we don't have that in the churchyard and would destroy it if we did. Giant hogweed escaped from gardens having been introduced from overseas. It's absolutely huge and, importantly, contains a chemical that makes your skin sensitive to sunlight, causing painful blisters. Whereas, as well as food for pigs, our native hogweed provides fun for all the human family. The hollow stems make great peashooters for children, and for the grown-up it was apparently used as an aphrodisiac[1].

[1]The PCC Health and Safety Lead has asked that neither pastime is indulged within the churchyard…

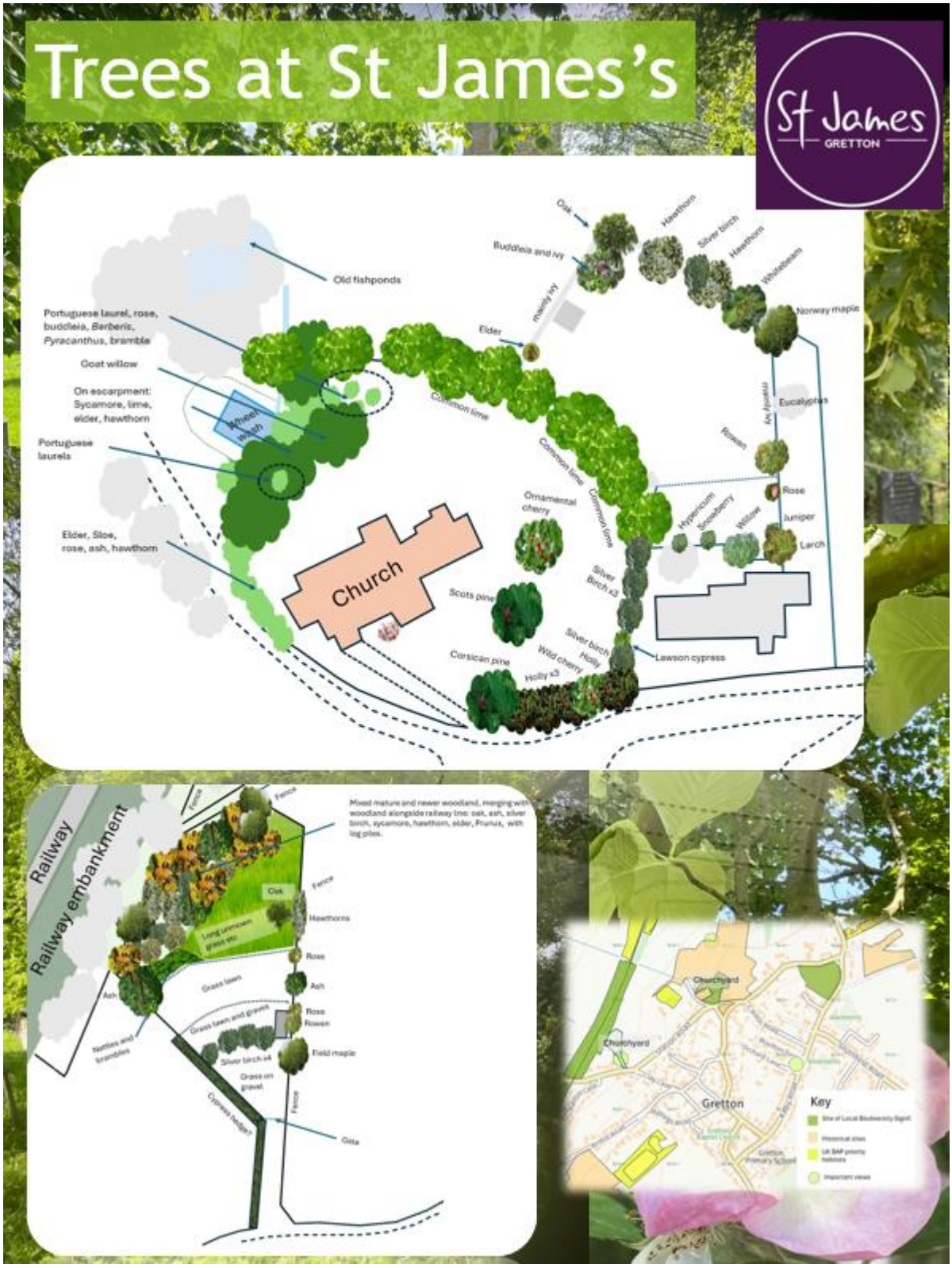
The plants you do have to be a bit careful of, however, are bryony and woody nightshade, both clambering over a Portuguese laurel bush. These attractive plants are toxic - but only if eaten. Not toxic, but painful if touched, of course, are the nettles – but these are very important sources of nectar for many insects including butterflies. Indeed, we encourage patches of nettles, especially in sun-dappled areas, as their leaves are also important food for caterpillars: red admirals, small tortoiseshell, peacock caterpillars love nettles, and the adults will all be seen in the churchyard later in the summer – especially on the Buddleia.

The morning was sunny but cool, and the only butterflies about were some orange tips and a green veined white. Having overwintered as chrysalises, these butterflies would have been looking for both a mate and garlic mustard, or cuckoo flowers, to lay their eggs on, in damper shaded areas around the north side of the churchyard and down by the cart wash pond.

JULY

Wildflowers and St James's flower festival


St James
GRETTON
Wildflower list (Upper Churchyard)
American willowherb (Epilobium ciliatum)
Autumn hawkbit (Scorzoneroides autumnalis)
Black medic (Medicago lupulina)
Bluebell (Hyacinthoides sp)
Broad leaved dock (Rumex obtusifolius)
Broadleaved willow herb (Epilobium montanum)
Bryony (Bryonia cretica)
Cicely (Myrrhis odorata)
Clustered dock (Rumex conglomeratus)
Common cleavers (Gallium aparine)
Common (lesser) knapweed (Centaurea nigra)
Common poppy (Papaver rhoeas)
Common sorrel (Rumex acetosa)
Common sow thistle (Sonchus oleraceus)
Cow parsley (Anthriscus sylvestris)
Cowslip (Primula veris)
Creeping buttercup (Ranunculus repens)
Creeping thistle (Cirsium arvense)
Cuckooflower (Cardamine pratensis)
Cuckoo pint / Lords and ladies (Arum maculatum)
Daffodil (Narcissus pseudonarcissus and cultivars)
Daisy (Bellis perennis)
Field woodrush (Luzula campestris)
Feverfew (Tanacetum parthenium)
Forget me not (Myosotis sylvatica)
Garlic mustard (Alliaria petiolata)
Germander speedwell (Veronica chamaedrys)
Greater burdock (Arctium lappa)
Greater celandine (Chelidonium majus)
Greater plantain (Plantago major)
Green alkanet (Pentaglottis sempervirens)
Ground ivy (Glechoma hederacea)
Groundsel (Senecio vulgaris)
Hedgerow cranesbill (Geranium pyrenaicum)
Hedgerow cranesbill (Geranium pyrenaicum)
Hedge woundwort (Stachys sylvatica)
Herb Robert (Geranium robertianum)
Hogweed (Heracleum sphondylium)
Ivy (Hedera helix)
Ladies bedstraw (Gallium verum)
Lesser celandine (Ficaria verna)
Lesser trefoil (Trifolium dubium)
Meadow buttercup (Ranunculus acris)
Nettle (urtica dioca)
Oxeye daisy (Leucanthemum vulgare)
Pansy (Viola X wittrockiana)
Prickly sow thistle (Sonchus asper)
Primrose (Primula vulgaris and cultivars)
Ragwort (Jacobea vulgaris)
Ramsons (Allium ursinum)
Red clover (Trifolium pratense)
Ribwort plantain (Plantago lanceolata)
Rosebay willowherb (Chamerion angustifolium)
Rough Hawkbit Leontodon hispidus
Snowdrop (Galanthus nivalis)
Sow thistle (Sonchus arvensis)
Spear thistle (Cirsium vulgare)
Speedwell (Veronica officinalis)
Teasel (Dipsacus fullonum)
White dead nettle (Lamium album)
Wood avens (Geum urbanum)
Woody nightshade (Solanum dulcamara)
Grasses
Annual meadow gras (Poa annua)
Barren brome (Bromus sterilis)
Cocksfoot (Dactylis glomerata)
Common False-brome (Brachypodium sylvaticum)
Common meadow grass (Poa pratensis)
Creeping soft grass (Holcus mollis)
Meadow foxtail (Alopecurus pratensis)
Rough meadow grass (Poa trivialis)
Sheeps fescue (Festuca ovina)
Squirrel tail fescue (Festuca (vulpia) bromoides)
Wall barley (Hordeum murinum)
Wild oat (Avena fatua)
Wood Meadow-grass (Poa nemoralis)
Tree and shrub list (Upper Churchyard)
'Firethorn' (Pyracantha sp?)
Ash (Fraxinus excelsior)
Berberry (Berberis darwinii)
Bramble (Rubus fruticosus)
Buddleia (Buddleja davidii)
Cherry ornamental (Prunus serrulata)
Cherry wild (Prunus avium)
Common lime (Tilia x europaea)
Corsican pine (Pinus nigra)
Dog rose (Rosa canina)
Elder (Sambucus nigra)
European larch (Larix decidua)
Field maple (Acer platenoides)
Goat willow (Salix caprea)
Hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna)
Holly (Ilex aquifolium)
Hypericum sp?
Juniper (Juniperus ???)
Lawson cypress (Chamaecyparis lawsoniana)
Magnolia sp?
Oak (Quercus robur)
Portuguese laurel (Prunus lusitanica)
Rose (Rosa spp)
Rowan (Sorbus aucuparia)
Silver birch (Betula pendula)
Sloe (Prunus spinosa)
Sycamore (Acer pseudoplatanus)
Whitebeam (Sorbus aria)


Trees at St James's
St James
GRETTON
Old fishponds
Portuguese laurel, rose, buddleia, Berberis, Pyracanthus, bramble
Goat willow
On escarpment: Sycamore, lime, elder, hawthorn
Portuguese laurels
Elder, Sloe, rose, ash, hawthorn
Church
Oak
Hawthorn
Silver birch
Hawthorn
Whitebeam
Buddleia and ivy
Norway maple
Elder
Common lime
Eucalyptus
Rowan
Rose
Hypericum
Snowberry
Willow
Juniper
Larch
Ornamental cherry
Silver Birch x3
Scots pine
Silver birch
Holly
Wild cherry
Holly x3
Corsican pine
Lawson cypress
Railway
Railway embankment
Fence
Oak
Hawthorns
Rose
Ash
Rose
Rowan
Field maple
Gate
Churchyard
Gretton
Key

Some summer wildflowers

There are lots of yellow and gold flowers in the short grass on the way into church - a few of them are dandelions, but most are a bit smaller and, frankly, difficult to identify without a close look with a hand lens. I think we have autumn hawkbit (smooth leaves, with finger-like lobes, and a flower head that tapers into the stem), common catsear or flatweed (hairier, less lobed leaves – apparently like a cat's ear - and flower head bell-like to the stem), and mouse eared hawkweed (very hairy, plain leaves and a bowl-like flower head). Hawkweeds and hawkbits get their names from the belief that, as Pliny the Elder put it some 2000 years ago in *Naturalis historia*, 'the hawk tears it open and sprinkles its eyes with the juice, and so dispels any dimness of sight of which it is apprehensive'. Hmmm… Elsewhere, the taller plant with similar flowers but branched stems and beech-like leaves is nipplewort, which takes its name from its flower buds, and of course the churchyard also contains lots of groundsel. All of these produce nectar used by butterflies, moths and other

insects, and on sunny days can be covered in stunning marmalade hoverflies.

A pre-industrial, and sustainable, air freshener, Lady's bedstraw gives off the scent of new-mown hay as it dries and was used in straw mattresses.

Its scent is due to coumarin[2], which, while it smells great, tastes rather bitter and is thought to be part of the plant's defences against herbivores. Apparently, the smell also repels fleas – another good reason for including it in your bedding. On the other hand, it doesn't repel moths and it's an important food for several moth caterpillars. There are also stories of it being used instead of rennet to make cheese (its French name is '*caille-lait jaune*' – yellow milk curdler), but apparently this doesn't work (or perhaps, as Richard Mabey diplomatically suggests in Flora Britannica, the recipe has been lost). It was, however, traditionally used to provide the extra strong yellow to double Gloucester cheese, and can be used as a dye. And it is still sometimes used as a food and drink flavouring[2].

[2] Coumarin is mildly toxic, especially to rodents, and chemical derivatives such as warfarin – a potent anticoagulant - are commonly used as rodenticides

The taller, highly scented white flowers are yarrow, a plant with a long cultural history. The word 'yarrow' seems to come from the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) word *gearwe* ('g' is often pronounced like 'y' in Old English – as in daegs eage = day's eye = daisy) and is similar to the Old Norse word *gørvi*. *Gearwe* means clothing, particularly armour, but seems also to have been used for the plant itself – perhaps because it was seen as protective? T he Norse word *gørvi* remains is modern English as the word 'gear'. Some claim that it's also the origin of the place name Jarrow, where Bede lived and worked, but it seems more likely the place name comes from gyrwas[3], referring to marsh dwellers. In herbal medicine it is used particularly to stop bleeding, hence its mediaeval name *herba militaris*. Apparently soldiers would carry it with them into battle, while its scientific name, *Achillea multiflorium* is based on the story that Achilles used yarrow to treat his comrades in Bronze Age battles. But it has even more ancient folkloric associations with luck, beauty, romance and mystic wellbeing far beyond utilitarian medicine. There's even pollen evidence from a Neanderthal grave of somebody being buried on a bed of yarrow mixed with other wildflowers.

It can also add a bitter, aniseed-like peppery oomph to salads – but a little goes a long way so do be careful if you try it.

[3] Some sources suggest Jarrow takes its name from the Gyrwas tribe/mini kingdom of Germanic Angles. But they lived in the Fens, nowhere near Northumbria. So I suspect that Jarrow simply comes from a more general gyrwas, meaning the people living in any boggy area, rather than the Anglian tribe. The Gyrwas tribe proper, owned land that included the town of Medeshamstede, where in the C10 (after it had been destroyed by Danes and then liberated by the newly self-styled Anglo-Saxons) an Abbey was built, dedicated to St Peter – hence Medeshamstede (meadow or Mede's farmstead) was renamed Peterborough… and hence also our Diocese…

Butterflies, dragonflies and ladybirds

When the sun comes out, there are still plenty of butterflies to be seen in the churchyard, although late July is often a bit quiet. On Sunday there were speckled woods, large whites and commas, and earlier in the week peacocks, small tortoiseshells and red admirals. Earlier in the summer there were orange tips, green veined whites, small whites and the occasional common blue – all of which should soon return as the second generation of the year.

Clock wise from top left: speckled wood, comma, gatekeeper, 14-spot ladybird, harlequin ladybird, 7-spot ladybird, peacock

Darting around the 'new' churchyard, doubtless enjoying the view across the Welland valley, was a large dragonfly – although I couldn't make out what species as it didn't stay still for long enough (this photo is is of a southern darter from a local pond – and what we see routinely in our garden). Last week, those in our garden pond had a mass emergence- maybe those in the churchyard are from the cart wash, below the escarpment, or maybe the old fish ponds further down.


The larvae spend 2-3 years underwater, going through several moults. They are fearsome predators eating tadpoles and even small fish. Finally they climb up a stem or leaf (they don't have pupae) and the adults emerge, fully formed but soft and pale (the blurry pictures here are because it was raining!). It may take several hours, during which they are easy prey for birds, before their wings and body fully unfurl and harden – then they fly off leaving behind the larval 'exuvia'. The adults eat other flying insects, and tend to live only a few weeks, during which they have to find a territory and a mate.

Also at the weekend were loads of 7-spot and harlequin ladybirds, and a few weeks ago a very small, yellow 14-spot ladybird. Seven- and 14-spots are common British ladybirds. Harlequins originally came from Asia, and were introduced for use in green-houses to control aphids - then they escaped. There were worries they could outcompete – and even eat - our local ladybirds, but they seem not to have done that so far. It's harlequins we get forming huge clusters in the vestry in autumn (although other ladybirds can do the same). Harlequins are very variable in colour, but can be identified from often having a distinctive black (if sometimes broken) 'W' on their white heads, and usually having orange legs.

By the way – did you see the photo of a vapourer moth caterpillar that Phil found in the churchyard recently? And, thinking about night-flying things, his video of the bats in the church porch?

AUGUST

Wasps

It's probably a hopeless mission, but I want to try to convince you of the usefulness – and even beauty - of stripey, 'yellow jacket' wasps.
All yellow jackets, including the European hornet, are social wasps that build large, intricate nests, centred on one queen, born the previous year and having mated with several males. Only these new queens survive the winter, hidden away in attic nooks, tree holes or sometimes underground in a burrow, until, on a warm spring morning, they emerge.

These queens initially feed on nectar from flowers, doing a bit of pollinating as they go. As soon as she's found somewhere safe to found her colony, the queen starts chewing fragments of wood from which, mixed with saliva, she will construct her beautifully ornate papier-mâché nest. Now she can begin laying her first eggs, which soon hatch. The grubs are carnivorous, so she has to hunt for insects – particularly caterpillars and aphids - to feed them until they pupate. When the first new adults emerge, all female but a mixture of full and half-sisters, they take over building a bigger nest and hunting for food for the next batch of grubs, leaving the queen to concentrate on egg laying.

At its peak each nest contains a few hundred to several thousand wasps, depending on the species, with the workers divided into professions – hunters, guards, and builders. You may see gangs of worker wasps on trees or garden furniture, chewing off the wood to take home for the nest There might be squabbles among the sisters and sometimes even palace coups. Some workers might lay sneaky eggs – but as they are unfertilised they only hatch out as males.
The very narrow waists of adult wasps mean that they can't eat anything other than high sugar and protein liquid food, so in return for being fed insects, the grubs produce a nectar-like substance to feed their big sisters. Hence, if you're spring picnicking, any bothersome wasps will

most likely be after meat rather than sweet things from your spread. By late summer and autumn, however, most of the grubs will be pupae and so no longer producing liquid food for their big sisters. Now you will find the adults after your sweet drinks and jam sandwiches. You can help with a survey of what wasps are eating when and where by filling out this online form.

The males – mainly around in late summer – do nothing (of course) except dawdle about drinking nectar from flowers, pollinating as they go, and, if they are lucky, mating with new queens in the autumn - then die. The males are docile and have longer droopy antennae. And (the stinger being a modified ovipositor –an egg-laying device – so lacking) they couldn't sting you even if they could be bothered to.

The two most common small wasps you can see in the churchyard and gardens at this time of year are common wasps and German wasps. If you look at them closely you can tell them apart by their faces; the common wasps have a teddy bear-like black anchor (above left), while the German wasps (right) have a broken anchor or even just three dots. The other small wasps you might see in more wooded areas are the tree wasp, which has just one facial dot, and red wasps - with a splodgy anchor face and a red tinge to the front of their abdomens. A bit larger and less common are the median wasps that have vertical stripes on their faces.

And if you're lucky you might find some hornets. An inch or more long. They have a fearsome reputation. '*And I will send hornets before thee, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite*' (Exodus 23:28) - God's shock troops for the ancient Israelite army.

But in my experience, hornets are pretty friendly unless you bother them[4]. The one in this photo was part of a nest in my uncle's garden in Kent, and, as long as I didn't take away her apple, she was perfectly happy to be peered at from only a few inches away.

So – wasps are sociable, pollinate flowers and eat aphids and other garden pests. Yet we concentrate entirely on their stings. The key to not getting stung is tolerance and respect. Waving your arms about suggests you're a predator, and they will attack back. And dying wasps give off a chemical that attracts other wasps, so don't squish them either. Rather, if they join your picnic, watch what food they are after, put some on a separate dish and gradually move it away from you. Unlike bees, wasps rarely recruit sisters from the colony, so think of this as a small kindness to a small stranger rather than buying into a Mafia-style protection racket. Shouting loudly, 'go away!' doesn't help much, although neither, I suspect, did Ronald Blythe's chanting 'I come in peace' as he carefully removed his 'cherished hornets', one by one, from his spare bedroom.

If you do get stung then use something cold to reduce the pain and swelling, maybe take a painkiller (ibuprofen or paracetamol), and you should be fine. Perhaps an over-the-counter antihistamine. If worried ring NHS 111, and of course in rare cases of severe allergy (respiratory distress or collapse), ring 999.

By the way, the old idea of alkali for bee stings and acid (such a vinegar) for wasp stings doesn't work as wasp venom is nearly neutral and anyhow that's not the problem – the venom contains a cocktail of substances designed to paralyse their insect prey and cause maximum local pain to bigger animals like you.

[4] The Asian hornet is more of a problem – a non-native species, it's a ferocious hunter that attacks bees in their hives If you see one you need to inform Defra who will try to track it back to its nest and destroy the colony. They're a bit smaller than our European hornets, and rather than deep red and yellow look mostly black with yellow legs.

OCTOBER

Conkers

Horse chestnuts originally came from Turkey, and their first mention in Britain is of one growing in John Tradescant's garden in the 1630s. Originally grown in private gardens and estates, so rarely encountered by the likes of us, they were later planted in the new public parks of the industrial cities and eventually escaped to hedgerows. After this they quickly became part of British culture.

There is some argument about why they are called horse chestnuts, but Richard Mabey points out they have the same name in Turkish, and there's a long history of their being used to treat bruises and strains in horses. Indeed, conkers contain a chemical- the saponin, aescin – that eases blood pooling and swollen limbs, but also other saponins that can be poisonous. There doesn't seem to be any evidence to back up the folklore that conkers repel spiders - but then why would you want to? Spiders eat many of the insect pests that you really don't want in your house! However, various saponins released as they dry out out do seem to repel clothes moths, so it might be worth putting some in your wardrobe.

As everyone knows, baking competition conkers, or soaking them in vinegar, to make them harder is cheating. But keeping them in the wardrobe for a year is natural and demonstrates patience – a virtue - and 'yearsies' are well… well 'ard. Saponins also have soap-like properties – and some shampoos contain horse chestnut extracts - so you could even use conkers to clean yourself up after a particulalry energetic conkers battle…

NOVEMBER

Poppies

We have wild and escaped (garden) poppies in the churchyard. None are in flower in November - they are at their height in August. But the month of Remembrance Sunday seems a good time to think about the bright red corn poppy.

Corn poppies are traditionally agricultural 'weeds' that grow in cultivated and disturbed land. Their seeds – and each poppy seed head contains hundreds of seeds – can survive in the soil for at least 50 years and maybe for a hundred or more. They have a long history, from the time of the ancient Egyptians and Assyrians, of association with cultivation and harvest but also of destruction and blood. Owing to the use of herbicides, they have largely disappeared from modern cereal fields and are most often seen today either where the ground has been disturbed, perhaps to build houses or roads, or, increasingly, deliberately seeded as part of wildflower mixes.

The obscene wasteland of churned mud and mire, pock-marked with shell holes – all that remained of the farmland of Belgium after the battles of the First World War – was soon covered in a more natural wildflower meadow. The Irish artist, William Orpen, was at the Somme in 1916 and returned a few months later:

> "*I had left it mud, nothing but water, shell- holes and mud — the most gloomy dreary abomination of desolation the mind could imagine; and now, in the summer of 1917, no words could express the beauty of it. The dreary dismal mud was baked white and pure — dazzling white. White daisies, red poppies and a blue flower, great masses of them, stretched for miles and miles.*"

And hence Colonel John McRae's poem, written while a medical officer in the Canadian army, after the second battle of Ypres:

> '*In Flanders field the poppies grow*
> *Between the crosses, row on row,*
> *That mark our place; and in the sky*

The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.'

At the East end of the churchyard, beyond the trees, are two 1918 Commonwealth Grave Memorials from the First World War. They help us to remember John Thomas Chapman and Arthur Coleman, who both saw action on the front in France and Belgium. John McCrae's poem led eventually to the adoption of the red poppy by the Royal British Legion in 1921, and it remains a potent symbol of remembrance.

We have wild, corn poppies occasionally popping up in the graveyard – probably where a visiting badger has dug a small snuffle hole or a burrowing mole has brought long-buried seeds to the surface. Perhaps a memory of a long-past meadow.

DECEMBER

Holly

Holly, ivy and mistletoe are amongst our most common evergreen plants (well, perhaps not mistletoe anymore), and were long part of ancient mid-winter celebrations, particularly across Europe. The Romans wore holly during Saturnalia, and it was also important in both Celtic and Scandinavian pre-Christian mythology. But holly was soon adopted to Christian symbology and so became an important part of Christmas celebrations. Until the Victorians popularised pine and fir Christmas trees (introduced not by Prince Albert but by Queen Charlotte), English Christmas trees were of holly.

Given this complicated history, it's not surprising that holly's traditions and mythology often blend pre-Christian with Christian symbolism. The mediaeval poem Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight is a good example of this merging of old and new. A mysterious Green knight arrives at King Arthur's Camelot during Christmas dinner: 'in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe, þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare, and an ax in his oþer…'). The holly bundle ('holyn bobbe') is a symbol of peace – unlike the axe..

In the carol, 'The Holly and the Ivy', the holly alone 'bears the crown', but in Celtic mythology the oak and the holly were kings who constantly fought it out, each ruling for half the year. Nowadays we know that hollies are 'dioecious' – that's to say the male and female flowers occur on different trees, and only the female flowers produce berries. Which I suppose makes hollies with berries queens rather than kings.

Old superstitions persist, and many people still think it's bad luck to cut down a holly tree. It's fine to cut berry-laden branches for decorations – but you should ask not just the owner but the tree itself first. Or, in the Celtic west, first ask the fairies and elves who live there.

Hedge-cutting with tractors has largely done away with the practice of leaving old holly trees standing higher than the rest of the hedge. Apart from risking bad luck, this was probably done because, as tall evergreens, they made excellent markers of paths and gates, or for aligning your plough. However, Richard Mabey in his book 'Flora Britannica', describes one man who said it was because leaving them tall stopped the witches from running along the hedge tops.

Their year-round leaves also make holly trees excellent shelters from rain and snow for both farm animals and people, especially if the trees are pollarded.

And finally, have you noticed that the prickliness of holly leaves varies, not just from tree to tree but often from branch to branch? Look at the hollies in the churchyard and pocket park, and you'll often see that higher up holly leaves, especially on older trees, are not as prickly as those lower down or on young shrubs. It seems the trees can switch on and off their prickliness in response to browsing animals – and maybe to secateurs at Christmas…

JANUARY

Lichen

At this time of year it can all be a bit grey and dismal – but there are some brightly-coloured and fascinating… um… life-forms in the churchyard, and now is a great time to take a look.

Lichens are amazing. Unlike mosses, they are not plants, but rather are colonies of fungi (some are essentially mini-muchrooms) living together with either algae or cyanobacteria. We often think of algae as simple plants, but they are actually rather different in structure and very diverse (some are more like simple animals), ranging from plankton to seaweed via coral. Cyanobacteria are bacteria that, like some algae and all real plants, are able to photosynthesise, that is to use sunlight, water and carbon dioxide to make oxygen and sugars.

So these simple-looking lichens are actually complex, mutually reliant communities in which the algae and bacteria produce sugars from sunlight, that are shared with the fungus, and the fungus in turn produces both minerals (from the rock it grows on) and shelter for the algae. Some people suggest they should be thought of as 'ecosystems' owing to their intimate relationship with the rocks on which they grow. Most lichens are slow growing - some colonies grow at less than a millimetre a year - so some of the lichens on the walls and gravestones may be hundreds of years old – or in the case of a lichen found in Alaska, maybe 10,000 years old.

You will find lichens growing on the church itself, on walls, gravestones and on some trees. They come in all shapes and sizes. Look at them up-close, or better still with a hand lens, and you will amazed at the miniature alien-like forests, like something from a 1970's sci-fi film.

Some lichens are very susceptible to pollution – so a variety of lichens is a good sign (all that wind in Gretton has its uses).

Identifying lichens is difficult, and they rarely seem to have common names that are easy to remember. Different lichens prefer different types of stone and rock or trees, so identifying what the wall or gravestones are made of, or what the tree is, can also help. Indeed, because gravestones are not always made of local rock, there can be more than 100 different types - of lichens found in one churchyard. It's thought that almost half of the 2000 types (you can't really call a community of fungi, bacteria and algae a 'species') found in Britain are found in graveyards. In fact, because of air pollution and our mania for cleaning buildings and so on, churchyards can be home to extremely rare lichens (lichens on old buildings are now seen as part of the building's – and so our – heritage).

We've not surveyed our lichens yet, and really need expert help for that, so we've no idea if any of ours are rare. You can look at the British Lichen Society's website to find out more. But frankly, whatever their names, they are fantastic and fantastical things that are well worth looking at more closely when out and about.

FEBRUARY

Snowdrops

When does spring start? The season takes it's name from the verb to spring – the springing up of flowers and crops after winter. It's also a fairly new term, as up until around 600 years ago the usual English word was Lencten or Lenten, simply meaning the lengthening of days (and from which we get the word Lent). Whatever, as optimists we must agree that February is (maybe very) early spring?

Whatever the weather (and boring pessimists) might claim, the earliest signs of spring, coinciding with noticibly lighter mornings and evenings, include snowdrops springing up from fresh green, if often frosty, grass banks. Their scientific name is *Galanthus nivalis* (*Gal-anthus* is from the Greek for milk-flower, and *nivalis* from the Latin for snow), but they are sometimes also called Candlemass flowers. Snowdrops symbolise hope and purity, and their flowers used to be scattered on altars on Candlemas Day. Some, at least, of our churchyard snowdrops were out in time for Candlemass, the 2nd of February, which this year (2025) was the first Sunday in February. In some ways this is not such a good sign, though, as It seems that snowdrops now bloom, on average, a month earlier than they did 70 years ago – a sign of creeping global warming.

Snowdrops are found throughout continental Europe but particularly in alpine areas, and while we think of them as native wildflowers, they are thought to have been introduced to Britain only in the late 16th Century. Like horse chestnuts, for a long time they lingered only in the gardens of the wealthy, and then the Victorians had a 'snowdrop craze' (a lover or collector of snowdrops is a galanthophile), producing many varieties, some of which soon escaped from gardens and naturalised. There are at least twenty

different wild species of snowdrops (three are commonly now found in Britain), but many hybrids and cultivars. You'll see several garden clutivars along with wild snowdrops in our churchyard and, if you know what you are doing, you can tell them apart by the size and shape of their leaves and flowers.

Snowdrops contain an antifreeze that allows them to survive the fiercest frosts, and if you look closely, you will see that on warmer days – above 10°C – they open their petals wide and lift up their heads to allow the bees access to nectar and encourage pollination.

As Wordsworth put it:

'Chaste Snowdrop, venturous harbinger of Spring…'

MARCH

Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs start to emerge from hibernation in mid-March as temperatures begin to increase. However, this is a particularly dangerous time for them as they will have used up much of the body fat they stored down in autumn of last year, yet food may still be scarce. Low energy levels and the cold can make them particularly prone to parasites and diseases.

Hedgehogs naturally eat worms, insects, slugs and snails, and sometimes ground-nesting birds' eggs. If you want to help feed hedgehogs, it's best to leave them a bowl of water (especially in dry periods) and some wet, meat-based dog or cat food – although you can also buy special hedgehog food as an expensive treat. But please don't feed them milk or bread, as if they have too much of either they get diarrhoea and can die. Unfortunately, like us if offered unlimited chips (or is it just me?), they will eat too much bread and milk as they absolutely love it.

After stuffing themselves with food, hedgehogs will often have a snooze– a bit like us after a large meal. I've seen them snooze in the feed bowl in our garden, then wake up and, without any embarrassment, have another quick snack before wandering off.

If it's warm enough, hedgehogs might start 'courting' in March, but the real 'rut' doesn't usually occur until at least April, and most babies (hoglets) are born, after around 30 days pregnancy, between May and July. However, courtship and pregnancies continue until the autumn and very late pregnancies can produce young that are too small and thin

to survive hibernation. So, the busiest times for rescue centres are often early spring with sick and thin hedgehogs and late autumn with hoglets too small to hibernate.

Hedgehog courtship during the rutting can be a noisy affair. There's lots of snuffling, huffing and puffing and snorting, and people are often amazed at the amount of noise a pair of 'in the mood' hedgehogs can make.

We don't see many hedgehogs in St James's churchyard. In fact, we haven't seen any recently on camera traps. However, there are lots around the village, and it's difficult to go for a summer's evening walk along the High Street without meeting several. They will be running up and down garden paths and along the pavements, and rather foolishly up the middle of the road –oblivious of human activities in their hurry to find food or a loved one. A camera trap set up alongside our house last summer provided footage not dissimilar to the A14 at commuting time as variously sized hedgehogs ran, walked or sauntered to and fro, right through the night.

Hedgehogs' main problems are people. Although they can run surprisingly fast, motorcars are the most obvious cause of the dead hedgehogs you might come across. But probably more important are the walls and fences that stop them moving between gardens (they cover a considerable distance each night searching for food), the general decrease in insects as food caused by our use of insecticides, and slug pellets in gardens. They don't have that many predators- their spines and ability to roll into a ball are really good defences. They will occasionally be eaten by foxes (although most reports are of foxes maiming hedgehogs by grabbing an unprotected leg, or eating road-killed hedgehogs), and rats often kill their young in the nest. It's thought that badgers are the hedgehog's main predator as a badger's strong claws can unroll a hedgehog, exposing its non-spiny and defenceless belly. However, while there are plenty of reports of badgers eating hedgehogs, they are still not an important part of the badger's diet, and there's no evidence that badgers are a significant cause of hedgehog mortality.

On the other hand, hedgehogs definitely tend to avoid areas with lots of badgers, and this might be why we don't see them in our churchyard, where badgers are year-round visitors.

We should be very grateful and pleased that we have so many hedgehogs in our village, and we should try to look after them. These once common animals have recently been reclassified by IUCN as 'near threatened' across the whole of Europe. Calculating hedgehog populations is difficult, but various approaches suggest a long term decline in population size, and despite campaigns to help garden hedgehogs, numbers have decreased on average 30% in the last 20 years, and by 50-75% in more rural areas.

APRIL

Bumblebees

In late March and April, you will see large bumble bees, not just feeding on flowers but purposefully zig-zagging about, exploring flower pots, garden sheds and holes in the ground or walls. These are queens, fresh out of hibernation and looking for somewhere to make a nest. They may be cold, hungry or thirsty, so you might like to give a tired-looking bumble bee a drop of water with some sugar (not honey as it may contain imported diseases) dissolved in it to help your bee on her way.

How do you know it's a bumble bee? Bumble bees are bigger, rounder and furrier than honeybees. Their name comes from the word bumble, which originally meant to hum[5]. Indeed, until about a hundred years ago they were usually called not bumble but humble bees[6] – in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Titania tells her fairies to fetch;

'…purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries. The honeybags steal from the humble bees and for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs…'

I can remember, as a child, hearing elderly relatives call them humble bees, but bumble seems to have driven that name nearly to extinction.

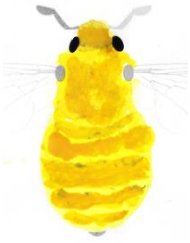
[5] The Old English word 'bum' meant boom (pronounce the 'u' in bum northern style to see how that works), so a bum-ble meant a little boom or a buzz or hum

[6] Of course that's humble as in hum, not humble as in humility (Latin *humilis* = lowly, linked to *humus* = soil).

For all the fuss made about honeybees (most honeybees are domesticated - wild honeybees are very rare nowadays), bumble bees are the really important pollinators, as different species have tongues of different lengths, so bumble bees can reach into and pollinate a much wider range of flowers than honeybees. Added to which, some bumble bees buzz and vibrate on flowers to stimulate the release of pollen from the anthers, while others have been known to chew on leaves and stems to encourage flowering. Bumble bees also have an electrostatic charge (caused by friction between their furry bodies and the air) and this makes sure the pollen sticks to them - although, like honeybees, they will work hard to stuff as much pollen as possible into the baskets on their hind legs to take back to their nests.

We have twenty-four species of bumble bee in Britain, of which seven are most likely to be seen in the gardens and churchyards of Gretton. The easiest way of telling them apart is by the colour of their bottoms (are they white/buff, or red/orange, or ginger/yellow?) and then looking at the banding or stripes on their bodies. You can find guides on the internet through the Bumble Bee Conservation Trust (which also has loads of other information and some great videos).

Worker[7] bumble bees most likely found around Gretton, are:



1. The common carder, which is ginger all over and has no obvious bands. Carders make nests in long grass.
2. The red-tailed bumble bee has a black body, with no bands but (you guessed it) a bright red bottom. Like many bumble bees, they tend to nest in holes in the ground.

[7] These descriptions are for workers, which are smaller than queens. The males and queens often have similar colours to the workers, but not always so you need to check out the guides



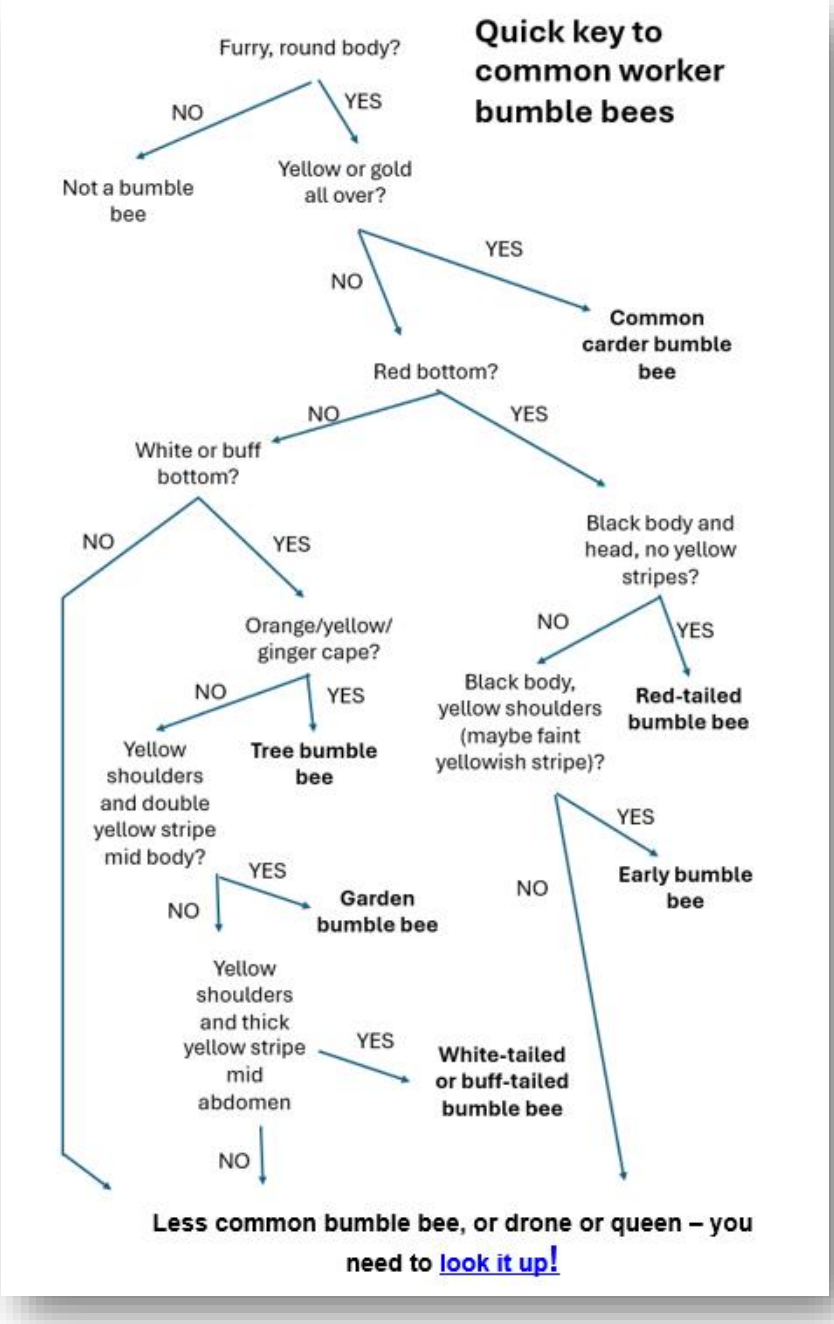
3. The early bumble bee also has a red tail and a black body, but yellow shoulders and possibly a dirty yellow band mid-body.
4. The tree bumble bee has a white bottom, a ginger cape and black head and body. It often nests above ground in bird boxes or lofts, and only recently moved here from mainland Europe.
5. The garden bumble bee has a white bottom, yellow shoulders and mid-body yellow stripes with a thin black line between.
6. Buff-tailed bumble bees have white or off-white bottoms, yellow shoulders, but just one thick yellow stripe, half-way along their abdomen.
7. White tailed bumble bees are very similar to buff tailed, but are maybe have whiter bottoms.


Unlike honeybees, bumble bees don't make honey. The queen bee, carrying fertilised eggs, finds a suitable site to make a nest, and little round wax pots to hold nectar and protein-rich pollen. She lays her eggs in wax cells – a bit like a honeybee's, but rather more haphazardly. Eventually each nest might contain between 50 and a few hundred bumble bees, depending on the species, but never anything like the 50,000 honeybees you can find in a single hive. The young workers help look after the nest and go foraging for more nectar and pollen. Males (drones) only appear at the end of summer, along with new queens. They leave the nest to mate with bees from other nests, and each winter the new queens hibernate while all the other bumble bees, old queens, drones and workers, die.

Like all insects, bumble bees are under threat from loss of diverse habitats and the use of pesticides. If you want to help the bumble bees[8], then encourage a range of flowers (especially clumps of perennials), vegetables (allowed to develop flowers), and flowering shrubs and trees in your garden, and don't use insecticides (including spot-ons on your

[8] About 19 minutes into this episode of Gardener's World is a great piece about Martin Dawn and his bee-friendly garden https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m002ctv8

pets). Maybe leave some longer grass for the carder bees to nest in, and provide a small water source. And keep a wildflower (they are not weeds if they are meant to be there!) corner. Bumble bees especially like dandelions (an important early source of nectar for queens in spring), white clover, common mallow, white dead nettle and knapweed – all flowers we have encouraged in St James's churchyard.



Easter Sunday 2025 wildlife