

# Wildlife by the Month in our Churchyards

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

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



Every month (more or less) we post something topical about wildlife (and sometimes scraps of history) in and around St James's churchyards. Several years' worth of these posts are brought together here to form a month-by-month diary of what is, or was, to be seen or heard. For no particular reason, we started in May.

(By the way, if you're reading this in hard copy, you might want to use the above links to find the online version, as that has more recent updates and contains hyperlinks to websites that have much more information.)



MB April 2026

## MAY

### May 2024: 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 informal French name *pisenlit* refers to one of its pharmacological properties.

**Nectar:** Dandelion flowers are an important early source of nectar for bees, butterflies and other important 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 (allegedly 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 deliberately planted in English orchards to do just that.

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



**Wishes?** Dandelion seed heads have long been used to tell the time and to make wishes. All you have to do is blow and make a wish (note: it doesn't work). The seed parachutes spin in the air as they fall, giving them extra helicopter-like lift, so the seeds stay up for longer and travel larger distances.

So the question is:

- are the dandelions on your lawn just weeds?
- or important food for the pollinators?
- or perhaps they are a glorious meadow of wishes just waiting to be made?



## May 2025: Cuckoos and cockchafers



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

<i>Sumer is icumen in</i>	<i>Summer has come in<sup>1</sup></i>
<i>Lhude sing cucu</i>	<i>Loudly sing cuckoo</i>
<i>Groweþ sed</i>	<i>Groweth seed</i>
<i>and bloweþ med</i>	<i>And bloometh meadow</i>
<i>And springeþ þe wude nu</i>	<i>And springeth the wood now</i>
<i>Sing cucu!</i>	<i>Sing cuckoo!</i>

Interestingly, the manuscript has not only these English words but, beneath them, in red letters (indicating greater importance), Latin lyrics about Good Friday – these perhaps add a semblance of religious propriety to the English lyrics (that are maybe a bit rude in the second verse, depending on how you translate *bucke uertep*) and its jaunty tune.

Another cuckoo ditty, found in lots of county-specific versions, is 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, although you might see one flying past (their barred underside, long tails and curved back wing shape make them look a bit like a plump sparrowhawk), and you can sometimes hear one as his song

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<sup>1</sup> 'is icumen' in Middle English means 'has come', and summer here means spring and summer (from the old notion of only two seasons). There's a huge debate about which set of lyrics came first. Catherine Clarke has a fascinating discussion of this song in her book '[A History of England in 25 Poems](#)'.

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 often change – maybe to a happier major third, or perhaps even going up rather than down (although sometimes this is young males practising and 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 parasitize. 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 where 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 in the churchyard. Orange tip adults have been about since the beginning of April, having over-wintered as pupae.



You might also sometimes see 'cuckoo spit' in the churchyard (here it's on some cleavers). The froth is produced by baby (nymph) froghoppers, 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 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, -green-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 often 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 beetle 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 think, however, that it more likely comes from their cockerel-like behaviour; 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 (although I've not tried this) the grubs taste fine as a soup or when [fried lightly in butter](#)...

## May 2025: 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 in grass-covered soil. We've discussed elsewhere (see March notes) how their presence may be why we don't see hedgehogs

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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, probably because they are nothing like 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.



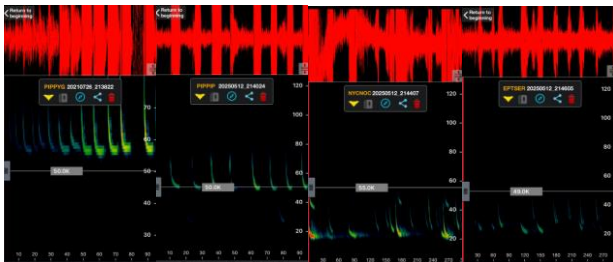
The most common animals picked up on the cameras, though, were muntjacs– both males and females, and maybe

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 round - 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 a 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 an 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 are 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

### June 2024: 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. The 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 hunting insects

Swifts only land to nest; they sleep and mate in flight. Their nests are of airborne 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.

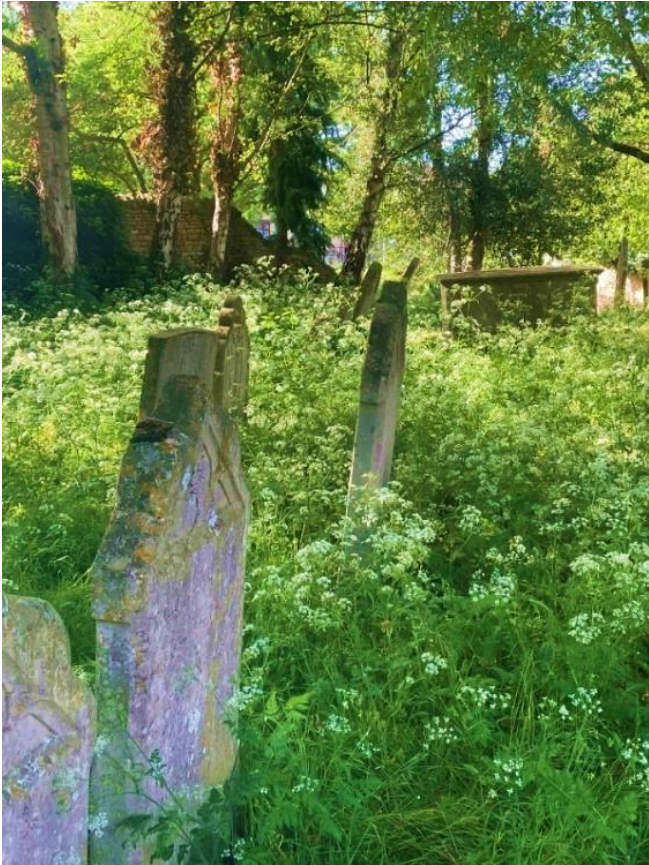
Unlike most adult moths who drink nectar, adult swift moths have no mouthparts and so cannot feed.



Common swift moth

## June 2025: A morning's walk

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



Like an orchestra warming up, some birds were loudly singing over each other while others squabbled over who should sit where. House sparrows chattered and argued in the hedges; a blackbird sang a rich operatic aria; wrens piccolo trilled; 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, repeated short 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 (by Steve), 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, who 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.



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The hollow stems make great peashooters for children, and for the grown-ups it was apparently used as an aphrodisiac<sup>2</sup>. The plants you do have to be a bit careful of, however, are briony and woody nightshade, both clambering over a Portuguese laurel bush. These attractive plants are toxic - but



only if eaten. Not toxic if eaten (they taste like spinach), 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 admiral, 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.

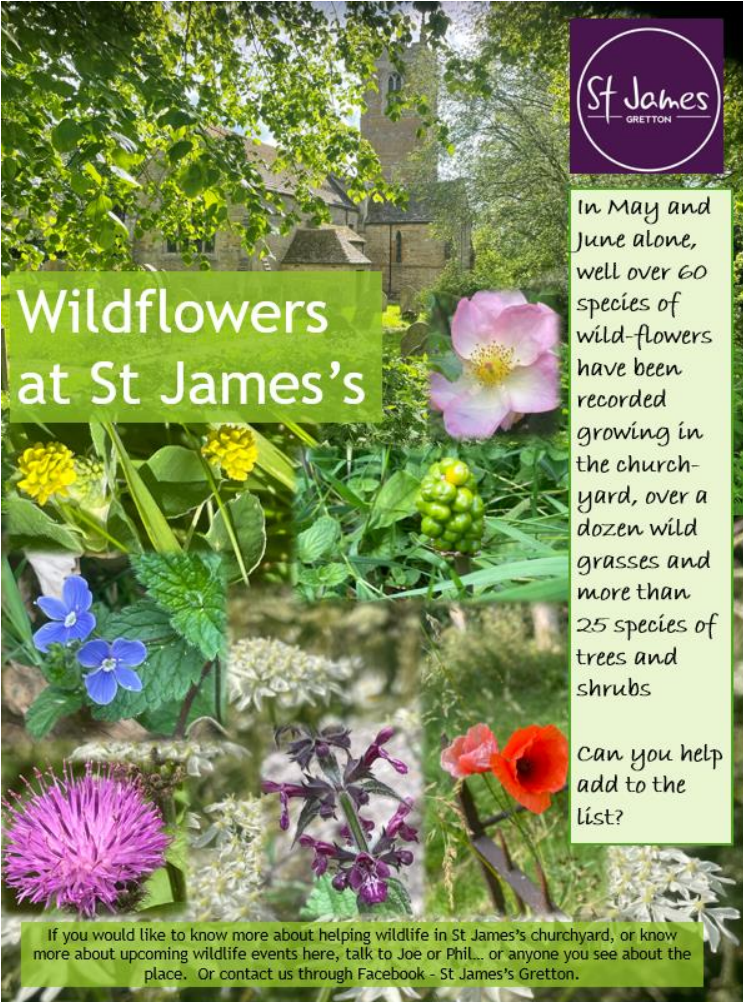


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<sup>2</sup>The PCC Health and Safety Lead (Phil) has asked that neither pastime is indulged within the churchyard...

JULY

July 2024: Wildflowers and St James's flower festival



**Wildflowers at St James's**

**St James GRETTON**

In May and June alone, well over 60 species of wild-flowers have been recorded growing in the churchyard, over a dozen wild grasses and more than 25 species of trees and shrubs

Can you help add to the list?

If you would like to know more about helping wildlife in St James's churchyard, or know more about upcoming wildlife events here, talk to Joe or Phil... or anyone you see about the place. Or contact us through Facebook - St James's Gretton.





## July 2025: 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 a flower head that's 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 [\*Historia Naturalis\*](#), 'the hawk tears it open and sprinkles its eyes with the juice, and so dispels any dimness of sight of which it is apprehensive'. Hmm... 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. Groundsel flower heads and seeds are also eaten by many small birds.



A kind of 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<sup>3</sup>, 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

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<sup>3</sup> [Coumarin is mildly toxic](#), especially to rodents, and chemical derivatives such as warfarin – a potent anticoagulant – are commonly used as rodenticides

work (or perhaps, as Richard Mabey diplomatically suggests in his [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<sup>2</sup>.

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 and used in battle. The Norse word *gørvi* remains in modern English as the word 'gear'. Some claim that *gearwe* is also the origin of the place name Jarrow, where Bede lived and worked, but it seems more likely that it comes from *gyrwas*<sup>4</sup>, referring to marsh dwellers. In herbal medicine yarrow is used particularly to stop bleeding, hence its mediaeval herbalist name *herba militaris*. Apparently,



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<sup>4</sup> 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 specific Anglian tribe. The Gyrwas tribe proper, owned land that included the town of Medeshamstede, where in the tenth century (after it had been destroyed by Danes and then liberated by the newly self-styled Anglo-Saxons) a new Abbey was built, dedicated to St Peter – hence Medeshamstede (meadow or Mede's farmstead) was renamed [Peterborough](#)... and hence our Diocese...

soldiers would carry it with them into battle, while its scientific name, *Achillea milleflorum* is based on the story that Achilles used yarrow to staunch his comrades' wounds 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, frankly, a little goes a long way, so do be careful if you try it.

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### July 2025: 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.



clockwise: speckled wood, comma, peacock, gatekeeper



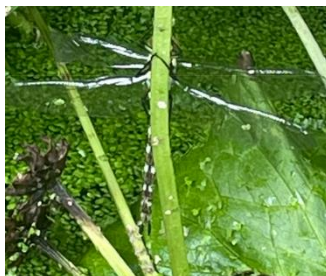
Darting around the 'new' churchyard, doubtless enjoying the view across the Welland valley, was a large dragonfly – although I couldn't [make out what species](#) as it didn't stay still for long enough (this photo is of a southern darter from a local pond – and what we see routinely in our

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 fishponds 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 now empty larval 'exuvia'. The adults eat other flying insects, and tend to live only a few weeks, during which they have to find both a territory and a mate.





L-R: 14-spot ladybird, harlequin ladybird, 7-spot ladybird

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 greenhouses 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

### August 2025: Wasps

It's probably a hopeless mission, but I want to try to convince you of the usefulness – and even beauty - of stripy, '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 establish her colony, each queen starts chewing up fragments of wood from which, mixed with



saliva, she will construct her beautifully ornate, but originally small, [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 (the one here was in the Pocket Park) 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 waist of an adult wasp means that she 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 (below) 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<sup>5</sup>. 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.



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 you can 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.

By the way, the old idea of alkali for bee stings and acid (such a vinegar) for wasp stings doesn't work, certainly not on wasp venom as it's nearly neutral (not alkali) and anyhow that's not the problem – the venom contains a cocktail of neurotoxins and digestive enzymes designed to paralyse their insect prey and start to digest it ready for feeding the grubs. That's why it hurts.



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.

### August 2025: House sparrows

We often think of house sparrows as common – and there are indeed lots around the church and village. Counting them is tricky as they don't stand still for long ('like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest') but all the various methods used to count them show that, overall, house sparrow numbers in Britain (rather like those other 'common' birds, starlings) have declined enormously.



*Male house sparrows with their smart black bibs and grey heads*

It's reckoned there are only about a third as many as there were fifty years ago, although populations seem to have stabilised over the past five or so years. Indeed, they are back to number one in the RSPB's annual [Big Garden Birdwatch](#) league table, and they are certainly doing well both in the churchyard, between the north side of the church and the treed drop to the cart wash, and in our back garden, despite a regularly visiting sparrowhawk.

A flock of around thirty makes a happy if argumentative racket every morning in the overgrown hedge just outside our kitchen. They are especially noisy if we're late providing toast crumbs.



*Female and juvenile house sparrows lack a black bib (which develops in males with age), have a pale stripe above the eye, and adult females have a smart white stripe on their brown wings.*

There seems to be no single, simple reason why numbers fell so much. Pollution is one possibility, especially in towns, and also diseases such as [avian malaria](#), which particularly affects the survival of nestling sparrows. It's transmitted by mosquitoes, who rather like the extra warmth and humidity found in towns and cities such as London, where the loss of iconic cockney 'sparras' led to a campaign to save them. In more rural and windy places (like Gretton) malaria probably isn't such a problem though, not least as mosquitoes are not strong fliers and don't like all that wind. Studies of farm sparrows suggest that winter starvation is the big problem, likely because animal feeds are stored more securely nowadays, and cereal crops being sown in autumn rather than spring means fewer seed heads in fields over the

winter. In both rural and urban areas, [insecticides](#) might also play a role as, in addition to grain (and toast), sparrows eat lots of insects, mainly aphids and caterpillars, especially nestlings.

Of course, there might be further clues as to why sparrows seem to be doing relatively OK in Gretton, clues both in the name – house sparrow – and my mention of overgrown



hedges. House sparrows are associated particularly with humans. Their cheeky use of our buildings for nesting and protection (not least from [sparrowhawks](#), [pictured left](#)) and the food we supply, whether farm grain stores or garden toast

crumbs, make them more successful where we are less house proud. They like to nest in overgrown hedges and holes in walls so one lesson seems to be that we should all do less DIY, less house maintenance and definitely less hedge trimming. The churchyard is full of places to hide, seed heads and insects (no insecticides here), and there's a flock of sparrows living between the north side of the church and the trees and shrubs on the edge of the churchyard.

According to Bede, in his 731 book, [Ecclesiastical History of the English People](#), [Edwin, the King of Northumbria](#) (and after whom Edinburgh is named) decided to convert to Christianity partly thanks to a parable told by his 'wisest advisor'. Allegedly (most scholars think Bede actually made the story up) this counsellor suggested that life was short and might be compared to a sparrow that flies through a window into the great hall, where the king and his noblemen are feasting and fires are burning, in from the cold dark winter outside, and then back out through another window.

*'Ita haec uita hominum ad modicum apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus. Unde si haec noua doctrina certius aliquid attulit, merito esse sequenda uidetur.'*

'So this life of men appears for a short time; what came before or what follows after, we do not know. Therefore, if this new religion brings anything more certain and more wise, perhaps we should follow it.'<sup>6</sup>

In a perhaps similarly transactional way, Matthew and Luke also say how important sparrows are, but disagree on the how much people think they are worth: 'are not two sparrows sold for a penny?' Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's knowledge', was Matthew's memory of what Jesus said, while Luke claims it was, 'are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?' Maybe Luke's is an early example of 'buy four and get one free', or perhaps it's a reflection of different professional approaches to pricing (tax collector and private physician). The point is, though, that sparrows might be small, fluttery and 'common', but they are still important (although maybe not as important as you).

Once they've gone, it's quite hard to get sparrows back as they live in large, family-based colonies with little movement over even quite short distances – if they do move to another colony, it's rarely more than half a kilometre away. So once a colony has gone, it takes a long time, maybe years, before new birds recolonise the patch.

Along with a lazier approach to DIY, another way to help is to provide extra food. This can, of course be done to excess – it's estimated that we provide enough nyger seed in British gardens each year to feed all the green finches in the world several times over. What's more, not all birds will come to feeders, so those that do can outcompete those that don't for nesting sites. If you do [feed the birds](#)<sup>8</sup> (and don't forget that the saints and apostles will smile each time someone shows that they care...), it's also worth thinking about [hygiene](#) – multi-storey bird feeders and water baths can bring together large numbers of different types of birds, and

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<sup>6</sup> Part of this passage, in modern English, has been [set to music by Kathryn Tickell](#) (with the words read by her dad)

<sup>7</sup> The original Greek says '[assarion](#)', a small, low-value bronze coin, variously translated into English as a farthing or penny.

<sup>8</sup> If a small bag of bird feed in around 1910 cost tuppence (2d) then the Bank of England inflation calculator suggests that would be the equivalent of around 45p nowadays, which would buy about 200g of the cheapest wild bird food – which sounds about right? Especially as that 2d would be London prices for Edwardian breadcrumbs.

[spreading disease](#). And some of the bacteria in bird droppings can infect people too, so wash your hands afterwards. Anyhow - moderation is, as usual, key. Just enough food to attract in small-ish numbers of birds, and not enough to attract non-avian visitors.

Grey squirrels and rats also enjoy the food you put out for the birds, and it can be very frustrating to see them destroy your feeders and steal all the food before any birds have



even reached your garden. One way to stop this is to mix in some [dried chilli or other hot peppers](#) with the bird food. While birds can taste chilli, they don't get the burn so are fine, but the squirrels and rats, like us, most definitely do get the burn - and they don't like it.

The only other type of sparrow found in Britain is the [tree sparrow](#), but I've not seen any in the churchyard. They are smaller, with brown heads and black spots on their cheeks. More countryside than garden, they sometimes join house sparrow flocks, so it's worth looking out for them. But they are not common, having fared even worse than house sparrows; their population size has fallen by more than 90% in the last 50 years.



You will, however, see and hear 'hedge sparrows', although they are not really sparrows at all and should properly be called dunnocks. Unlike the [chirping](#) of sparrows, dunnocks have a [piping](#), scratchy song. Sparrow-like, but with longer more pointy beaks and a

thunder-cloud-grey head (but brown crown), they run shyly through the undergrowth in ones or twos, sometimes mistaken for mice, eating mainly spiders and small insects. They will also eat seeds, but rather than coming to bird feeders, you'll see them on the ground beneath, eating what's been dropped. Close up (like wrens) they are stunningly beautiful. As well as being a common victim of parasitic cuckoos (see April), they have a 'complicated' sex life, that we should probably not go into here.



Bird watchers sometimes refer to 'LBJs' – Little Brown Jobs – when they are not quite sure what that bird they glimpsed was. If you're confused too, then try this quick [guide from the RSPB](#) – all the above birds plus juveniles of birds like robins that can look similar until they've developed their adult plumage.

SEPTEMBER

September 2025: Autumnal fruits, roke and *hærfest*



`Tis the season of stunning rokes in the Welland valley.

Nowadays 'roke' is a regional dialect word, found particularly north and east of here, as befits its Viking origins – although, sadly, now forgotten in the Viking settlements of Corby and Thorpe. Now, as then, it means a 'mist' (the AngloSaxon's – and therefore the Grettonian's - preferred word) rising from the land. The end of September is the beginning of John Keats's 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness', not yet full autumn but a time for apples, 'plumped hazels', and, 'later flowers for the bees', for Wordsworth's 'pensive beauty' anticipating John Clare's 'fall of an acorn on the ground, the pattering of nuts on the hazel branches as they fall from ripeness'.

Trees around the churchyard and on the slope to the Welland are on the turn as, with decreasing day-length, their leaves lose their chlorophyll – the green pigment that absorbs all the colours in sunlight and rainbows except green, and uses that light-energy to convert carbon dioxide and water into sugar and oxygen. It's the build-up of other chemicals in the leaves, usually masked by green, that make the leaves now appear yellow and red, before these leaves, cut off from the tree, turn brown, die, and fall to the ground.



This fall of leaves provided the season's name – fall – the word used in later mediaeval England and which lives on in American English. In England, the early eighteenth-century fashion became to use the French word *autumn(e)*. And thus fell 'fall' out of favour. Earlier still, the word used was *hærfest*, as in the Anglo-Saxon poem:

*Sumor sunwligtogost swegel byð hatost*

*Hærfest hreðeadegost hæleðum bringeð geres  
wæstmas þa þe him god sendeð.*

(Summer sun-lightest sun is hottest / autumn most-glorious brings men the year's fruits that God sends).

Bringing in the harvest was, of course, a hugely important community event, celebrated in different places at slightly different times according to the crops, usually with music, food, alcohol... and predictable consequences. Lammas Day (*hlafmæsse* or 'loaf mass') celebrated the first bread made from that year's corn. Events marking the end of *hærfest* became a bit more controlled in England in the 1840s, not least thanks to Parson Hawker, a Cornish vicar, who pretty much invented today's Harvest Festival, including singing (in English) the German hymn '*wir pflügen und wir streuen*'. A (probably exaggerated) biography of Hawker, by Sabine Baring-Gould (a clergyman, but also an antiquarian, collector of folk songs and writer of hymns, including 'Onward Christian Soldiers'), has it that Parson Hawker was not only a wonderful, humane man, who battled against the infamous 'wreckers' of the Cornish coast, but a rather eccentric character who excommunicated his cat<sup>9</sup>.



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<sup>9</sup> 'He was usually followed to church by nine or ten cats, which entered the chancel with him and careered about it during service. While saying prayers, Mr Hawker would pat his cats or scratch them under their chins. Originally ten accompanied him to the church, but one, having killed and eaten a mouse on a Sunday, was excommunicated, and from that day was not allowed in the sanctuary.'



This year (2025) is a 'mast year', owing to a particularly warm spring (remember?) and co-ordinated by the underground network of fungal mycelia through which trees talk to each other. *Mæst* is another Anglo-Saxon word meaning acorns, beech and other nuts, especially used to feed

swine, and you can already see large numbers of acorns and beech masts both on trees and littering the ground – you can also feel the crunch as you walk. This not only leads to more trees ('from tiny acorns...' or as Geoffrey Chaucer put it, 'as an ook cometh of a litel spyr'), but provides extra food for wildlife – and in time provides food and shelter for still more wildlife. In medieval times, pannage in Rockingham Forest – turning out your pigs to eat the masts – would have been very important for fattening up swine that, salted and dried, would you through the winter; you would, of course, 'eat everything except the squeak.' Perhaps this tradition, of valuing and not wasting our food, is one we might reintroduce today?



## OCTOBER

### October 2024: Conkers

Horse chestnut trees 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 for their spring candle-like flowers, 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](#) in his *Flora Britannica* 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 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 both natural and, furthermore 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 particularly energetic conkers battle.



## October 2025: Red kites

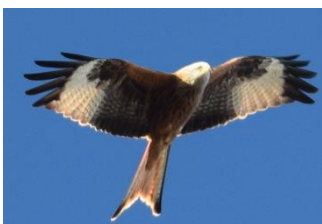


Although we can see red kites over the village throughout the year, they seem especially close as they float over Gretton's roof tops on clear and sunny October's days, mewling their whistle-like 'peeooooe'. The low autumn sunshine glows off their red backs, white heads and forked tails as they sail the ridge thermals. Aristotle believed that red kites' use of tails in

flight taught men how to steer their boats on the sea.

Red kites used to be common, not just in wild places but in cities and towns. They were important scavengers, removing waste from our streets and countryside in much the same way as vultures still do in other parts of the world. They were more than tolerated at a time when the boundary between city and countryside was blurred, and when livestock was butchered, and offal piled up, on city streets; London's Mount Pleasant was, with some irony, named after the pile of offal and other waste that was dumped in Clerkenwell in the 1730s.

City kites were also known for their lack of fear of humans. In the Knight's tale, written around 1390, Chaucer describes two starving knightly prisoners arguing over a bone:



*Ther cam a kyte, whil that  
they were so wrothe,  
And baar away the boon  
bitwixe hem bothe.*

That's our dog's experience too if she doesn't keep an eye on her bone in the garden.



William Turner, the physician, herbalist, protestant reformer and ornithologist, published the first ever printed book devoted to birds in 1544<sup>10</sup>. He described how what he called 'rufous kites' were '*wont to snatch food out of children's hands in our cities and towns.*' And John Taylor, the self-styled 'water poet' of London, wrote that they '*do good offices by devouring and carrying away our Garbage and noyesome excrements.*' Although the usefulness of scavengers was recognised, refuse collection, like many other important occupations, wasn't always seen as high class. Thus, kites are frequently mentioned by Shakespeare but usually in either insults (Goneril is called a 'detested kite'

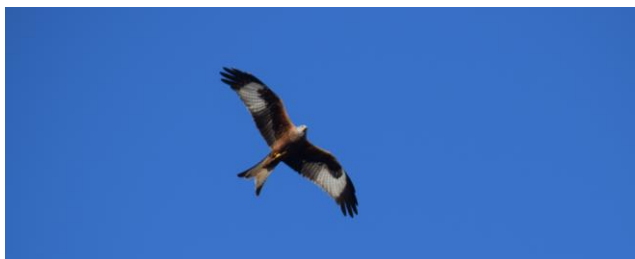


by her father, King Lear) or in dark contexts, such as in Hamlet, when the eponymous prince regrets having not killed King Claudius: *I should have fatted all the region kites / With this slave's offal.*

As well as scavenging and stealing food, kites were notorious for stealing laundry hung out to dry and even hats from people's heads, to decorate their stick, grass and wool-lined nests. This habit continues; the RSPB reports finding gloves, string, sunglasses and children's toys in kites' nests, and even of kites swooping to steal underwear that had been left on a bank by skinny dippers.

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<sup>10</sup> [Avium praecipuarum, quarum apud Plinium et Aristotelem mentio est, brevis et succincta histori](#) (p141 in this linked translation) compared Aristotle and Pliny's descriptions with Turner's own observations, particularly of British birds. It was published in Germany during one of his religion-forced exiles from England. A fascinating discussion of historical attitudes to red kites and ravens can be found in [Lee Raye's 2021 paper](#) in the London Journal.



The development of better sanitation, drove both kites and ravens out of our towns by the late eighteenth century, and, although they are scavengers with feet not strong enough to kill anything much larger than a rodent or chick, they were hunted and poisoned to extinction in England and Scotland by 1880. Just a few clung on in mid-Wales. It is thought there were less than 20 left in Wales by the 1930s – indeed DNA studies suggest that until recently all Welsh kites were descended from one female. Although legally protected, pesticides such as DDT reduced breeding in the post-war years, and their rarity encouraged egg collectors. However, the Welsh kite population did begin to grow slowly. I remember staying for a week on a farm in Pembrokeshire in 1977, where I saw my first red kite, one of maybe thirty or so by then. And there were perhaps 100 breeding pairs in Wales by the mid-1990s. But slow population growth and their apparent inability to spread beyond Wales led at a reintroduction scheme in the 1990s.

Birds from Wales and Spain were [released first into the Chilterns](#) (you can still see the descendants of these birds over the M40 cutting – that view used in the [opening credits of Vicar of Dibley](#)), and I had a very small involvement in that when as part of pre-release health checks, samples from some imported birds were sent to me for checking for virus infections. As that new English population grew, further birds from there, Spain, Sweden and Wales were released in other parts of Great Britain, including at Fineshade woods in 1995. All these populations have grown, spread and intermingled such that red kites are now found in most English counties, and have even been reported exploring central London, nearly 300 hundred years after they left.

The children's toy kite, symbol of a [father's redemption](#), is named after the birds.

## NOVEMBER

### November 2024: 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 were traditionally regarded as agricultural 'weeds' as they 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 natural wildflower meadow. The Irish artist, [William Orpen](#), was at the Somme in 1916 and when he returned a few months later recorded that:

*"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 another memory, this time of a long-past meadow.

## November 2025: Robins

My favourite bird book is 'The Charm of Birds'. Published in 1927, it has the most good-natured of prefaces: 'This book will have no scientific value. Those who have studied birds will not find in it anything they do not already know; those who do not care for birds will not be interested in the subject'.



My reason for looking the book out again was for its chapter on hand-feeding robins in winter. I was prodded in this by a robin following me around the churchyard, hopping along the fence, and then two robins in our garden, one with its territory at the top and the other at the bottom, who watched me as I potted and pruned. I couldn't tell if they were boys or girls: it is impossible to differentiate the sexes of robins by just looking (impossible for us humans, that is – robins are very good at it). Indeed, traditionally robins were thought of as males and wrens as the females:

*'The robin and the wren /Are God Almighty's cock and hen'*

Both sexes establish, and fiercely protect, their territories at this time of year, only sharing come spring and the breeding season. [Alciato's Emblemata](#) of 1531 reflects this in the epigram, '*Unum arbustum geminos non alit erithacos*' – one

bush does not nourish two robins. As well as obvious aggressive territoriality, both sexes also sing throughout year (except during the summer moult), a wistful and melancholic, liquid song in a minor key. They also sing before dawn and after dusk, or later now we have streetlamps<sup>11</sup>. *Autumn Robin* by our local poet, John Clare, begins with:

*Sweet little Bird in russet coat  
The livery of the closing year  
I love thy lonely plaintive note  
And tiney whispering song to hear  
While on the stile or garden seat.*

Robins have a long history of living closely with humans and



of hanging around for crumbs and titbits. I remember my grandmother (in her tiny kitchen, turban-like scarf on her head and a cigarette, with a seemingly impossible, and gravity-defying, length of ash, dangling from the corner of her mouth) had a robin that would come to the open window and sit on the sill to be hand-fed scraps of bacon rind, carefully scraped from breakfast plates. Wordsworth

also described robins coming in through his window for breakfast with his wife and sister-in-law, Mary and Sara.

In the children's rhyme:

*The north wind shall blow, and we shall have snow  
And what will poor robin do then?  
Poor thing!*

Well he might sit in a barn, or he might come into the church. William Wager, writing in 1500 described a robin

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<sup>11</sup> The robin's song has therefore been mistaken for nightingale's, just as collared doves' 'who **who** whoo' gets confused with cuckoos' despite its three, not two, syllable song.

living inside the church in winter: *Robin redbreast with his notes/ Singing aloft in the quire*. While John Skelton, around 1550, had another robin in a church who sang a complete mass: *And robin redbreast,/ He shall be the priest /The requiem mass to sing, / Softly warbling...*

The author of *Charm of Birds*, Edward Grey, is perhaps best remembered as Sir Edward, later Viscount Lord Grey of Falldon, Britain's longest-serving Foreign Secretary. He is most famous nowadays for his remark to a friend in 1914, on the eve of the First World War. As he looked out of his office window in London at the gas streetlights being lit, he said, 'the lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them again in our lifetime'. You may remember that, echoing this, many public buildings dimmed their lights on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2014, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of that 'war to end all wars'. All his life, Grey's recreation was observing birds. Even when he lost his sight, he would listen to their song (and fly-fish by touch). He was not in any way a 'twitcher', always chasing the rare – rather his book is about the pleasure we can all get from observing common birds, and, importantly, sharing that pleasure with others. After his death, in 1933, the University of Oxford established the [Edward Grey Institute for Field Ornithology](#), which still undertakes cutting edge ecological, behavioural and conservation research.



Robins were originally called ruddocks, then red-breasts, then robin redbreasts; Shakespeare used all three names.

Alliterative Robin alone, the diminutive of Robert, doesn't commonly appear until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The robin is one of very few British birds that has adopted a human name – magpie, jackdaw and Jenny wren – and the only one to have kept only its Christian name. Robins are also given human names in some other languages. In his poem *The Redbreast and the Butterfly*, Wordsworth wrote:

*...Art thou the Peter of Norway Boors?  
Their Thomas in Finland,  
And Russia far inland?*

Robins eat seeds and small insects, and they follow close behind large farm animals in the hope of finding worms in the churned-up ground. They do the same with us whenever we dig the garden or otherwise disturb the soil. This extends to graveyards as well, and may be the origin of the folkloric idea that robins show charity to the dead, covering our graves in moss and leaves. Robert Herrick, the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet and vicar, wrote *To Robin Redbreast*:

*Laid out for death, let thy last kindness be  
With leaves and moss-work for to cover me;  
And, while the wood-nymphs my cold corpse inter,  
Sing thou my dirge, sweet-warbling chorister!  
For epitaph, in foliage, next write this:  
Here, here the tomb of Robin<sup>12</sup> Herrick is!*

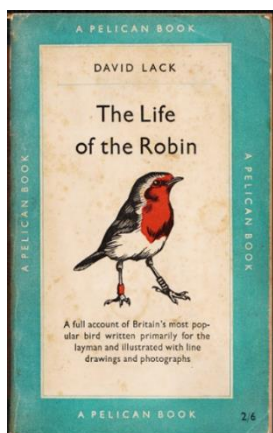
For their trust in us, we returned with respect for them. Killing or trapping a robin or disturbing its nest brought bad luck, growths, arthritis and animal disease. 'A robin redbreast in a cage / puts all heaven in a rage,' wrote William Blake.

Rev CA Johns wrote in 1909: 'The redbreast is everywhere invested with a kind of sanctity beyond all other birds. Its wonted habit of making an appearance, no one knows whence, to greet the resting traveller in places the most lonely... [the way] it throws itself on human hospitality – engender an idea that there must be some mysterious

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<sup>12</sup> I love that Robert becomes Robin in this last line.

connexion between the two – that if there were no men there would be no robreasts.'



The best book about robins, *The Life of the Robin*, was written by David Lack in 1943, two years before he became Director of the Grey Institute. It is 'dedicated to all those robins who patiently bore my rings and permitted my intrusions into the intimacies of their lives'. As well as describing their behaviour and ecology, based on years of field observation, he also wrote of their literary and folkloric history, and noted that Victorian postmen wore red waistcoats, and hence were nicknamed robins – this at the time when

Christmas cards were being developed. Early cards depicted postie-robins but avian robins quickly took their place as bringers of Christmas greetings, although often with a strange and morbid Victorian twist.



By the way, many cards (and many poems – Emily Dickinson wrote loads) depict American rather than European robins (here as painted by [John Audubon](#)). The American robin is completely different, belonging to the thrush family - although still red-breasted and, like many thrushes, a great songster. They seem to have got their names when early English settlers arrived in the Americas, and knowing little natural history (or, indeed, anything very



practical) misnamed them<sup>13</sup>. It's these rockin' American robins that come bob, bob, bobbing along every Christmas.

How did Edward Grey get robins to feed from his hand? With a little patience. *'The bird is first attracted by crumbs of bread thrown on the ground; then a meal-worm is thrown to it; then a box – such as one of the small boxes in which chemists sell lozenges – is placed open on the ground with meal-worms in it. When the bird has become used to this, the next step is to kneel down and place the back of one hand upon the ground with the box open on the upturned palm... This is the most difficult stage, but robins will risk their lives for meal-worms, and the bird will soon face the fingers and stand on them... The final stage, that of getting the bird to come to on to the hand when raised above the ground is easy. The whole process may be a matter of only two or three days in hard weather when birds are hungry... confidence has been established and does not diminish when weather becomes mild and food plentiful.'* Grey (rightly) assumes males are easier to tame than females, who in the breeding season will get the males to collect mealworms for



them. His first robin, White Feather, *'became very tame, and after satisfying his appetite would sometimes sit on the hand so long it was necessary to give him a gentle hint to go.'*

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<sup>13</sup> Apparently, the colonists were also surprised to find turkeys in their new home. Turkeys were brought to Europe from the Americas by the Spanish, but by the time they arrived in England were assumed to come from the east – maybe from Turkey? The French were even worse, assuming they came from India, hence *poulet d'Inde* or *dinde/dindon*.

## DECEMBER

### December 2024: 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 symbolism with that of a newer Christian church. 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, pat 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...



## December 2025: An alternative to turkey?

I once asked my colleague Heikki (pronounced Hay-key), a wildlife expert who lives in Helsinki, what he might have for Christmas dinner. While those of a sentimental disposition may wish to stop reading at this point, the following recipes could come in handy if someone has an accident while parking on your roof on Christmas Eve. The classic Finnish dish is, he told me, *poronkärstys*. *Poro* is reindeer and *kärstys* means fried.

Reindeer are [not found in the wild in Britain](#), having been hunted to extinction some 800 years ago. However, there is a free-range herd in the Cairngorms, and small farmed herds elsewhere (sometimes hired to spend a few weeks incarcerated in shopping and garden centres at this time of year). Interestingly the idea of flying reindeer is much older than [Clement Clarke Moore's poem](#), and there are ancient '[deer stones](#)' depicting them flying in Mongolia and the Altai. Anyhow Heikki's recipes are:

*"Take a frozen steak (e.g. 1 kg), and slice thin chips. It must be frozen but preferably slightly softened, not rock hard, that you can nicely slice the chips. The thinner, the better." Heat in a pan and get rid of the melting water, then add butter, salt and black pepper. Simmer for about one hour. Serve with mashed potatoes and either cowberry or cranberry jam. Heikki said that in Norway they have something similar "that they call Finnsteak. However, milk or cream is added which real Finns never do for this dish. The original way, the reindeer taste is best."*

I've never had *poronkärstys*, but I have tried reindeer stew, which is delicious. As Heikki points out, *"you can make stew from those parts that are not the most tender ones. Just let it simmer long enough."* Again, it should be served with mashed potatoes and a generous dollop of cranberry jam (sometimes referred to as 'Rudolph's nose').

If you have a bit more time, you might like to try the Sámi speciality of dried reindeer meat. *"Take reindeer blades or steaks, keep them in strong salt water for a couple of days, then move the meat to the roof of your house into a special box made of wire net. Meat is let to dry in wind and frost for a month - the wire net is to prevent crows and ravens. Thin chips will be sliced for eating with bread, or soup can be made."* This is apparently a good way to preserve meat for sandwiches in the summer. Alternatively, you can smoke the meat, but the result is apparently rather addictive.

### December 2025: Ivy



Ivy is so common that it's easily ignored, as it scrambles over walls and up trees. It's sometimes regarded a weed, even a parasite, and blamed with damaging walls and killing trees - probably because it's associated with ruins and decay. However, ivy has its own strong roots that supply all its nutrients from the soil, and it uses walls and trees merely for support using specialised 'adventitious roots', which grow out of its branches and are covered with tiny hairs that cling into small, pre-existing crevices using a ['biopolymer' glue](#). These allow ivy to climb vertically up to 30m, although no higher than their support. So while its weight can sometimes pull down branches and dead trees, and it is good at finding gaps in buildings through which to grow, it can also shelter and even hold up old buildings. Indeed, it's encouraged on some old buildings by English Heritage – a living scaffold.



Its evergreen leaves come in two forms: juvenile three-lobed leaves and adult heart-shaped leaves. At this time of year, it may be still in flower, providing rare winter nectar for those bees, hoverflies<sup>14</sup>, moths and other insects that venture out on warmer days and nights, stocking up for hibernation.



As December continues, however, its fat-filled, black berries feed birds, especially thrushes, blackbirds and woodpigeons, as well as wood mice, who use ivy's cover to climb remarkably high up into trees.

All year round, it provides shelter for bats and birds. Its evergreen leaves make it ideal for Christmas wreaths

on modern front doors, while the ancient Greeks and Romans wreathed their poets' heads with ivy, not laurel (despite which we have a poet laureate). In classical times, ivy wreaths were also worn by followers of Bacchus as they were believed to protect the wearer from inebriation however much they drank (this doesn't work – you just look both drunk and very silly).

Ivy's clinging and its way of spreading across the ground and then up again, joining several trees together, have also made it a symbol of love and fidelity, and so sprigs are worn, or found in bouquets, at weddings. It became a popular girl's name in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century along with other floral names<sup>15</sup>. And trailing ivy is a common border in medieval manuscripts.

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<sup>14</sup> A recent report suggested that hoverflies are responsible for 70% of pollination – far more than bees. We'll look into that again in the summer as there are lots of hoverflies in the churchyard.

<sup>15</sup> Ivy is back in the charts again – it was the sixth most popular girl's name in England and Wales in 2020, although back down to number 25 (between Scarlett and Ella) in 2024. Other floral names in the top 50 include: Violet (16), Lily (18), Hazel (23) and Willow (27), with Iris just missing out at number 54.

Of course you can always depend on Samuel Johnson for something clever yet ambiguous: 'A good wife is like the ivy which beautifies the building to which it clings, twining its tendrils more lovingly as time converts the ancient edifice into a ruin.'

John Clare, in his poem 'To the Ivy', combines both the negative vibe with the more positive:

*Dark creeping Ivy, with thy berries brown,  
That fondly twists' on ruins all thine own,  
Old spire-points studding with a leafy crown  
Which every minute threatens to dethrone;  
With fearful eye I view thy height sublime,  
And oft with quicker step retreat from thence  
Where thou, in weak defiance, striv'st with Time,  
And holdst his weapons in a dread suspense.  
But, bloom of ruins, thou art dear to me,  
When, far from danger's way, thy gloomy pride  
Wreathes picturesque around some ancient tree  
That bows his branches by some fountain-side:  
Then sweet it is from summer suns to be,  
With thy green darkness overshadowing me.*

'Picturesque' was the trendy word of the in-crowd in Clare's Romantic times, literally meaning 'worthy of a picture'. I do wonder if he used it seriously here, though, or, given his usually realistic take on the darker nature of nature, he was mocking those readers who were swept away by the romance of the 'ideal' view. In a vogue that prefigured today's smart phones, the fashionable carried with them '[Claude glasses](#)', small mirrors of tinted glass with which, their backs to the real view, they stumbled about trying to create the ideal reflected image of the scene behind them. The poet Thomas Gray (of [Elegy in a Country Churchyard](#) fame) had a nasty fall doing exactly this. It reminds me of my history teacher at school who (a bit, although not totally, unfairly I think) told us to put away our cameras on a school trip, so as not to 'live for the future so that in the future you can live in the past.'



We have two native species of ivy in Great Britain. The common ivy *Hedera helix* (*hedera* is Latin for ivy, while the modern English word ivy comes from the Old English *ifig*), has three-lobed juvenile leaves and is found all over Europe, including in our churchyard. *Hedera hibernica*, the Atlantic ivy, is more common along the west coast and in Ireland, and has five- or even seven-lobed leaves. There are lots of other ivy species found around the world, some of which are



grown in gardens as ornamental plants, as well as garden varieties of common ivy, with deeply cut or variegated leaves. Plus there are lots of unrelated plants whose habit or looks mean they have ivy in their names. Ground ivy, for example, also found in the churchyard, is a type of wild mint, that scrambles over the ground. Its Anglo-Saxon name was *hofs* which survives in its alternative name, alehoof, as it was used to clarify and flavour ale before hops started to be used in the sixteenth century.

Wild ivy leaves in the churchyard are an important spring and summer food for caterpillars of various butterflies and moths. Ivy leaves also appear in the medieval English phrase, found in Chaucer, 'go pipe [i.e. blow] into an ivy leaf', which means something like 'go whistle in the wind'.

But let's give the final words to Vincent van Gogh, who had an eye for natural beauty. Writing home in 1877 he said, 'How right it is to love flowers and the greenery of pines and ivy and hawthorn hedges...'

December 2025: churchyard early winter



## Wildlife in St James's churchyards



## New Year 2026: Winter blooms

Each year, over the New Year period, the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland undertakes a [New Year Plant Hunt](#). So we thought we'd participate in the churchyard this year, especially as there have been few records from our area. The idea is to identify any flowers (wild or naturalised – so garden escapes count but not deliberately-planted garden plants) that are in flower over the New Year. As the survey has been going on since the 1950s, this enables botanists at the BSBI to look for trends over time.



Flowers in bloom might be late flowering or early flowering, and trends in their presence or absence can reflect simple yearly and local variation, climate change and/or habitat changes. In [last year's survey](#) (of around 20,000 sites), top of the list was the daisy, followed by dandelions, groundsel, white dead nettle, and annual meadow grass.

In Christmas week, we saw primroses, daisies, alkanet and a dog rose all in flower in the churchyard – which just about survived to New Year's Day, but were knocked back by the ice and snow of the next few days - with dandelions, yarrow, groundsel, autumn hawkbit and ground ivy flowering on roadside banks around the village.

## JANUARY

### January 2025: 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-mushrooms) 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 be 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.



## January 2026: Joy illimited

Some animals migrate to hotter climes for the winter; we shall not see swallows, martins and swifts for several months. Others hibernate. There are butterflies hibernating in the vestry, moths in the vault under the church, and ladybirds at the top of the tower by the bells. Our bats, who have their spring and summer maternity roost in the church porch, will be hibernating somewhere else – maybe underground in a cellar or cave. Their body temperatures drop to near ambient and their heart rates drop from hundreds to tens of beats per minute, although on rare, very warm, evenings pipistrelles might emerge from their hibernation and risk burning precious brown fat stores in the hope of finding a moth.



Bats, hedgehogs and dormice are the only British mammals to truly hibernate. Many mammals, although not properly hibernating, simply spend a lot of the winter asleep, emerging now and then for food. Our badgers, for example, will have fattened up in the autumn so as to be able to spend



much of the winter snug underground, occasionally emerging and visiting the churchyard to snack on worms. Only, of course, if the ground isn't frozen, as that drives the worms down and out of reach. Beneath the grass, however, our moles are active all year round. If the surface freezes, they just dig deeper, looking for the worms who simply fall into the moles' tunnels. Just to be sure, though, as they are unable to put on much body fat, from the autumn, moles store up worms in underground pantries. The worms are alive (and so fresh) but can't escape as they are

paralysed by a well-placed bite behind the head, although some think that, like shrews, moles may have a worm-specific neurotoxin in their saliva.

Meanwhile, above ground, this is a time of year when the lack of leaves makes it easy to see those birds that are out and about. Most obvious are the blue tits and great tits coming to Phil's feeders, and the blackbirds energetically throwing about leaf litter like overexcited dogs with Christmas wrapping paper. If you stand still and wait, every



few minutes flocks of long tailed tits loop chattily from tree to tree. Tiny goldcrests, some resident birds and others winter visitors from Scandinavia, hide at the top of churchyard trees, but can be recognised by their high pitched 'yup-yup' call. Noisiest, of course, are the rooks in the rookery beyond the old vicarage, constantly arguing, their racket punctuated by the 'clattering' of shouty jackdaws. On

the north side of the church, you might see a brown flash between bushes and hear the urgent alarm call of a wren. Wrens, and robins, are among the few birds that sing throughout the year; blackbirds will give their 'chink chink chink' alarm call if you disturb them but won't start singing properly until around February. Gilbert White wrote out his list of birds that sing by month in a letter written in November 1769. Although he observed that song thrushes also don't start singing routinely until around February, they sometimes do sing in the winter, and there was one in the churchyard doing so, gloriously, the other day. Rev CA Johns, in his wonderfully personal 'British Birds in their Haunts' of 1862 (these illustrations – 'presentments' – by William Foster are taken from a 1909 edition), wrote of the song thrush; 'However near it may be, its song is never harsh, and at a distance its only defect is, that it is not nearer.'

It's not at all clear (to me at least) whether Thomas Hardy's darkling thrush was a song thrush or a mistle thrush; does darkling refer to the thrush, and if so does it mean darker

(song thrush) or greyer (mistle thrush), or does it simply signify its singing at dusk? His poem was written for New Year's Day, 1900, and his thrush, through the gloom and cold, sang joyously (mistle thrushes are often a bit hesitant and melancholic, hence I'll plump for it being a song thrush).

*I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray<sup>16</sup>,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day...  
...And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.*

*At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.*

*So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.*



If, during cold and gloomy January, you feel in need of some joy illimited, not to mention blessed hope, you could do worse than to listen out for a song thrush.

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<sup>16</sup> Hardy spelled grey with an 'a' so we'll go with that. Apparently the American and British spellings only diverged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, long after his poem was written.

Wildlife in St James's churchyards



The churchyard, 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2026

## FEBRUARY

### February 2025: Snowdrops

When does spring start? The season takes its name from the verb 'to spring' – the springing up of flowers and crops after winter. It's a fairly new term; up until around 600 years ago the usual English word was Lencten or Lenten, which simply meant the lengthening of days (and from which we get the word Lent). Whatever, as cheerful 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 noticeably 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 Candlemas 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 Candlemas, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, which this year (2025) was the first Sunday in February.

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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 cultivars 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, venturesome harbinger of Spring...'

### February 2026: Shadows of spring?

Candlemas, on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, celebrates Jesus's presentation to the temple, at forty days old, and the 'purification' of Mary. Simeon recognised him, and his words gave us the liturgical prayer, '[Nunc Dimittis servum tuum, Domine](#)' often sung at Evensong (and funerals) to settings by [Orlando Gibbons](#), [Thomas Tallis](#), [Charles Villers Stanford](#), [Gustav Holst](#) and [Geoffrey Burgon](#) (just to list some English composers). It is also a 'quarter day', exactly half way between the winter solstice and spring equinox, and so has long signified, along with [Plough Monday](#) back in January, the beginning of the traditional farming year. As such it also

'coincides' with the old Celtic festival of *imbolc* (a word that might be derived from a still older word for lambs) and, in Ireland, it's St Brigid's day (Brigid, perhaps suspiciously, has the same name as a Celtic goddess.

In any case, Candlemas is commonly associated with the beginning of spring and weather forecasting. John Skelton wrote in 1523:



*'Men were wonte for to discerne  
By candlemas day what wedder  
shulde holde.'*

The idea is that good weather at Candlemass is bad news. As John Ray wrote in 1678:

*If Candlemas day be fair and  
bright  
Winter will have another flight  
If on Candlemas day it be  
showre and rain  
Winter is gone and will not  
come again.*

This year it's been relatively mild but wet in the run-up to candlemas – the bees have been out and feeding on the snowdrop nectar, and the snowdrops are themselves a bit more advanced than last year. Cuckoo pint leaves are shooting up, as are daffodil leaves. And the robins, instead of always fighting, are sometimes seen in pairs.

Meanwhile, in North America, Candlemas means Groundhog Day. Groundhogs (this painting is by [Audubon](#)), are also known as woodchucks, or marmots, a type of ground squirrel. The basic idea behind groundhog day is also



weather forecasting; if the groundhog casts a shadow, then the weather is unseasonably good, and so there will be at least six weeks more winter. Across the USA and Canada,

local groundhogs compete for the title of most accurate weather forecaster, including Potomac Phil, who is now dead and stuffed but is still (literally) wheeled out to see if he casts a shadow. Statistics, it must be said, show groundhog-based predictions are rubbish<sup>17</sup>.

The American tradition seems to have started around three hundred years ago when German and Swiss settlers, escaping religious persecution at home, migrated to what is now called Pennsylvania, a colony founded by the Quaker William Penn but named after his father<sup>18</sup>. These settlers spoke a variety of German dialects which merged to form 'Pennsylvanian [Dutch](#)', still spoken today by Amish and Mennonite communities. The immigrants brought with them old Candlemas traditions from home, although there are no marmots in northern Germany and the original tradition there was associated with badgers. If badgers emerged by Candlemass, then further bad weather was on the way. Interestingly, [German Canadians](#) in Nova Scotia (who were sent there by the Hannoverian British military to keep out the French) used to call Groundhog Day *Daksday*. *Dachs* is German for badger; those cuddly dachshunds were bred to be the shape they are in order to go down badger tunnels. Strangely, there are no stories of European marmots making weather predictions in the Alps.

Of course, we don't have marmots in Grettton, but we do have badgers. I can't find anything about badgers predicting the weather in this way in the British Isles, though. Rather, there are stories of hedgehogs weather forecasting, particularly in the west and Ireland. This might make sense since, as we've discussed before, our maritime climate means that badgers don't really hibernate here, and they often pop out even during snow if the ground isn't frozen. But hedgehogs do hibernate and do sometimes emerge in early February – perhaps more frequently in the west owing to the warm Gulf Stream.

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<sup>17</sup> Potomac Phil [cast no shadow in 2026](#), predicting an early spring in America. He did the same last year, though, and got it badly wrong.

<sup>18</sup> William Penn encouraged religious freedom, and even seems to have negotiated fair-ish treaties with local American tribes. The land was granted by Charles II to his father, Admiral Sir William Penn (a friend and neighbour of Samuel Pepys) in lieu of debts.

While people around the world invoke animals as short-term forecasters of weather, in warmer countries, where animals tend not to hibernate, linking an animal's appearance at Candlemas to predictions of spring weather perhaps wouldn't be expected. My Spanish friend Amelia couldn't think of any equivalent stories from Spain. I recently read something about blackbirds in the Italian Alps. However, Matyas, from Hungary, tells me that for him it's bears. If a Hungarian bear peeks out from hibernation at Candlemas and the weather is good, after a brief scratch and stretch it goes straight back to sleep as good weather means more bad weather is on the way. While marmots, badgers and hedgehogs are pretty 'cool', bears are seriously so, and thus, while it's not a competition, if it were then Mat would have won (as he always does with wildlife stories).

This year it's been cold, but mild and wet in the run-up to candlemas – despite the rain, the bees have been out after the snowdrops. We put camera traps out in the churchyard to see what was out and about over Candlemas. No badgers or bears, just a fox and some muntjac, and somebody's cat. I doubt this tells us anything about early or late springs - we'll just have to wait to see ...



### February 2026: Starlings and drugs

Noisy, gossipy and messy, bullies on the bird table, still so common they are often regarded as pests, starlings are beautiful birds if you but look closely. The iridescent, glossy, shifting purple-to-blue-to-green colours of the plumage change as your angle of view moves, and result not from reflection but from the refraction of light through barbules,

the tiny hooks that bind together, like Velcro, the vanes of their feathers. Half a rainbow in one bird.

Starling, the name, comes from the constellation of star-like white dots and arrow-heads scattered across this dynamic dark background.

If they weren't so common, I'm sure we'd take more delight in them.



Sad to say, though, that however hard we look, we colour-blind humans are still missing out on a lot. The 'black' of starlings is because their feathers don't reflect visible light, but if you were a starling, like many other birds, you would be able to see ultraviolet light. Your fellow starlings would be much brighter and more highly coloured in a way we can only guess at even with clever camera technology. What's more, you would easily be able to tell boy from girl starlings, as the girls are apparently much brighter in UV.

The starling's song is a composition of whistles, clicks, warbles and screeches, or as Pam Ayres put it:

*We don't go in for this singing all day  
And twittering about, we just squarks.*

They also click their beaks, as in Richard Aldington's 'Round Pond':

*In the budding chestnuts  
Whose sticky buds glimmer and are half burst open*

*The starlings make their clitter-clatter  
And the blackbirds in the grass are getting as fat as  
pigeons.*

Mozart had a pet starling (he arranged a very [fancy funeral](#) and wrote a requiem poem for it when it died), and he jotted down its song in his notebook in 1784. "Das war schön!" he remarked. The starling's song was very similar to the opening bars of his piano concerto No.17, which he had finished just a few weeks earlier. For like their relatives the mynahs, starlings are accomplished mimics, not just of piano music but of other birds, lawn mowers, car alarms, phones and human speech. Mark Avery, the naturalist, conservationist and writer based in nearby Raunds, has a blog on [starling mimics](#) with links to recordings of wild starlings doing impressions, and if you do a quick internet search you'll find captive starlings mimicking human speech.



Starlings are not as common as they were, and the flocks seen in and around the churchyard are too small to form the giant murmurations seen on TV nature programmes, although you can still see flocks of up to around a hundred birds over the village. Larger murmurations are

particularly seen in the winter when our resident starlings are joined by cousins migrating from cold Scandinavia.

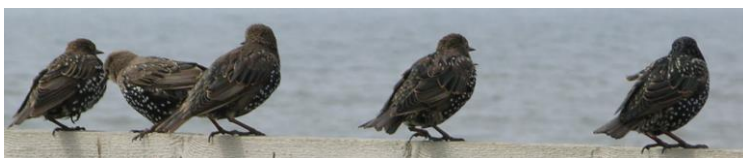
Overall, though, [starling populations](#) have halved since the 1990s, and by over 80% since the 1970s. As always, there's probably a complicated mix of reasons for their now appearing on the UK Red List. The use of insecticides and loss of worm and insect-rich grassland are probably major causes. Other intriguing reasons might include pollution with human drugs, which we excrete in our wee and poo. Starlings in winter get an increasing proportion of their food from invertebrates living in farm slurry and at sewage works. Studies at York University showed that worms at sewage works are contaminated with, among other things, the antidepressant Prozac, and, even at low doses, this [affected starling behaviour](#). Starlings on Prozac had reduced fear of

predators, reduced appetite, and were so chilled out they lost all interest in sex – not great if your population is already in decline.



It's not just human drugs getting into the environment that can cause problems for wildlife. The spot-on flea treatments, readily bought from supermarkets and the like for dogs and cats, quickly wash off into drains and waterways. The chemicals in them, particularly [fipronil](#) and [imidacloprid](#), were originally designed as insecticides for crops, but have long been banned from agricultural use across Europe owing to their devastating effects on, particularly, aquatic invertebrates, with effect travelling up the food chain. Indeed, imidacloprid is a neonicotinoid – the group of insecticides infamous for their

effects on bees. That despite being banned for crops, they can still be detected in our rivers and streams – especially in urban waterways – is probably down to their use in pets. The immediate answer for us pet owners is simple; avoid spot-on flea treatments, and only use flea treatments to treat, not year-round to 'prevent'.



## MARCH

### March 2025: 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 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.



## March 2026: Daffodils, vicars and piles

Monday, 2<sup>nd</sup> March was St David's Day (Dydd Gŵyl Dewi), when proud Welsh people everywhere wore a daffodil. Or maybe a leek:

**Fluellen**:... *And I do believe, your Majesty takes no scorn to wear the leek  
Upon Saint Tavy's Day.*

**King Henry**: *I wear it for a memorable honour,  
For I am Welsh, you know, good countryman.*



Shakespeare's play [Henry V](#) focusses on [Agincourt](#), but here refers to the 1346 [Battle of Crécy](#) when Welsh long bowmen fought in a field of leeks under a previous Prince of Wales, by then Edward III. But the leek tradition in Welsh folklore goes back to at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century when either St David or King Cadwaladr allegedly told Welsh Christian troops to wear leeks so as to be able to identify each other when fighting pagan Saxons. Of course these weren't the

massive leeks you get from Asda (and that tend to be worn on the modern stage), but rather [wild leeks](#), originally brought by migrants from the Mediterranean in Bronze Age times, and now rare in Wales. Wild leeks are much smaller – looking perhaps more like modern chives with, in summer, a spray of purple flowers.

Daffodils seem to have started replacing leeks in the early twentieth century, a fashion encouraged by David Lloyd George. Nobody knows why there was a switch in floral attire, except the obvious – that there are more flowering daffodils around this time of year than flowering wild leeks (and they maybe smell nicer). In Welsh, daffodils are called *cennin Pedr*, Peter's leeks – possibly after St Peter, but nobody is sure and St Peter's day is in July when the daffodils are long gone. There is, though, a tradition that

daffodils, symbols of new starts, bloomed at the base of the cross, and Peter was the first (male) to see the risen Christ; and in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, daffodils were included in [some crucifixion paintings](#).

In English they are sometimes called Lenten lilies (lent originally meant spring, but later referred specifically to Lent), but daffodils are no more lilies than leeks. Their scientific name, *Narcissus*, comes from the Greek νάρκισσος / narkissos, meaning a toxic plant, maybe a lily, based in turn on νάρκη / narke, which means numb, and from which we get the word narcotic. [Narcissus](#), according to the Roman poet Ovid, intoxicated with his own reflection, wasted away, leaving behind only a flower (and, much later, a psychiatric term). Daffodil bulbs are, indeed, toxic if eaten and handling them can cause a skin condition known as 'florist's itch'. I have read that some Victorians wouldn't have cut daffodils in the house as they could induce madness.

Just to make things even more complicated, the English word daffodil only seems to have been around for about 400 years. Before that, they were called affodiles; nobody is sure where that initial 'd' came from. Most books suggest affodile is a corrupted form of asphodel (another group of plants to which daffodils don't belong). Some people claim the word comes from the Old English for 'early comer' – but I can't find the original source for that, and it doesn't fit with any Old English dictionaries (*dile* or *dyle* means... dill - as in the herb... not the [dog](#)). All this makes it very difficult to know what plant people are writing about in old manuscripts, books and translations.



However, we all know what we mean by daffodil nowadays, don't we? And mostly we agree that that whatever people in the past thought, daffodils are cheerful harbingers of spring and full of hope – hence their adoption to the [Marie Curie Daffodil Appeal](#). David Hockney, during covid lockdown in Normandy, published iPad drawings of daffodils, entitled '[Do](#)

[Remember They Can't Cancel the Spring](#)', while Picasso allegedly said that 'no one has to explain a daffodil... You never have to ask why.'

I suppose the most famous literary reference to daffodils has to be William Wordsworth's poem. I confess, though, that for me, while some lines are clever, some are real duds ('stars that shine/ And twinkle on the milky way'). Even at the time, the poem met a mixed reception and his close friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, apparently referred to it as 'that damned thing about daffodils.' The poem isn't really about daffodils, to be fair, but about the memory of seeing them while in a bit of a grump on a blustery walk along Ullswater with his wife, Mary, and sister, Dorothy, a couple of years earlier. It was Dorothy who pointed out the cheerful daffodils to her brother. In her diary for Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1802, she wrote:

*It was a threatening misty morning—but mild. We set off after dinner from Eusemere.... The hawthorns are black and green, the birches here and there greenish but there is yet more of purple to be seen on the Twigs. We got over into a field to avoid some cows—people working, a few primroses by the roadside, woodsorrel flower, the anemone, scentless violets, strawberries, and that starry yellow flower which Mrs C. calls pile wort. When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow park we saw a few daffodils close to the water side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more and at last under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about and about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness and the rest tossed and reeled and danced and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake, they looked so gay ever glancing ever changing*

Nowadays, the UK is the world's biggest commercial grower of daffodils, of which there are about thirty species and thousands of varieties. [Rev George Engleheart](#) was a vicar, in Appleshaw, Hampshire, and then in Clarendon, Wiltshire where set up a daffodil nursery and bred over 700 varieties of daffodils. Known as '[the father of the modern daffodil](#)', he was also a keen archaeologist, particularly of the Roman era, so it's interesting that what we think of as native flowers, wild daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) were probably introduced to Britain by the Romans, who planted them as road-side memorials to dead colleagues. We have both wild and cultivars of daffodils in the churchyard. The wild ones are particularly important for pollinators in spring, as the garden varieties often produce little, or inaccessible, pollen. Of course, hybrids between the wild and garden varieties also arise – although it takes years for daffodils to grow from seeds.



Also in the churchyard are primroses (and garden primulas) and cowslips, both of which have been on and off in flower since the New Year but are really coming into their own now. As both grow together, and are closely related, we can also see some hybrids of the two,

the so-called false oxlips. True oxlips look similar but are very rare and limited to a few places in East Anglia nowadays, where they indicate remnants of ancient woodland. Cowslips have their flowers all drooping to one side, whereas the false oxlips have their flowers more evenly distributed around the main stem.



The other yellow flower, just starting to bloom is the lesser celandine, a member of the buttercup family, with bright, shiny sun-like petals. It particularly likes damper areas and the shade, but not rain, drops of which make its flowers close up. *'Coming suddenly round a corner into a glade of silver birch trees*

*Edmund saw the ground covered in all directions with little yellow flowers- celandines,'* wrote C.S. Lewis in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, a sign of spring and the arrival of Aslan in Narnia.

Wordsworth thought 'humble celandines' his favourite flower, and worthy of three poems.

*'There's a flower that shall be mine, 'tis the little celandine'*

His [memorial plaque, in St Oswald's Chapel](#) in Grasmere, was supposed to have a lesser celandine carved into it, but the sculptor carved a [greater celandine](#) by mistake.



Interestingly, the lesser celandine's medicinal uses provide it with the alternative name, mentioned in Dorothy Wordsworth's diary entry, 'that starry yellow flower which Mrs C. calls pile wort.' [Nicholas Culpeper](#), writing in 1653, claimed that '...the virtue of an herb may be known by its *signature*; for if you dig up the root of it, you shall perceive [the perfect image of the disease they commonly call the piles](#).' Whether or not a poultice of powdered celandine roots really works, I do not know.

### March 2026: March hares and Easter bunnies

We occasionally see rabbits in the both the upper and lower churchyards, but mainly they are in neighbouring fields. And while I've not seen any hares in the steep field at the back of the upper, old, churchyard, they have been seen in the field by the lower churchyard and are common down in the valley.



Archaeologists have found brown hare bones dating to the pre-Roman Iron Age, and, unlike the native mountain hares that are still seen in Scotland and, very rarely, the Peak District, it's thought that brown hares were deliberately introduced to Britain in the fifth

to third centuries BC, at around the same time as chickens. The skeletons of both were carefully buried intact, with no

signs of their having been cut up or eaten. Indeed, Julius Caesar wrote of the British in '[De Bello Gallico](#)' (his account of his wars in Gaul and Britain), 'they do not regard it lawful to eat the hare, and the cock, and the goose; they, however, breed them for amusement and pleasure.' He went on to remark that, 'the climate is more temperate than in Gaul, the colds being less severe' thus giving the lie to later scandalous claims that the weather in Gaul is better than here <sup>19</sup>.

Genetic studies suggest British hares likely came from northern Europe, as they are most closely related to those in the Netherlands and Denmark.

Although the Romans hunted and ate hares, the British seem to have maintained a more respectful attitude to these animals, seeing them [as free spirits, mystical and semi-divine](#) – completely understandable if you've ever met one face-to-face on a misty March morning. The Icenian queen, Boadicea, according to the Greco-Roman historian [Lucius Cassius Dio](#), ended her speech that led to the famous [anti-Roman revolt](#) by [letting 'a hare escape](#) from the fold of her dress; and since it ran on what they considered the auspicious side, the whole multitude shouted with pleasure'.

According to my translated Bestiary (based on two thirteenth century texts in the [Bodleian Library](#)), 'the hare is... a swift creature and fairly timid. The hare represents men who fear God and who put their trust not in themselves but in the Creator'. Medieval bestiaries, see animals as living parables – the scholar's job was not to study the animals but rather to determine the lessons they hold for us. Bestiaries also never let the facts get in the way of a good story. For example, my copy tells me about *bonnacons*, the stench of whose dung 'singes anything it touches within two acres' and thus 'keeps all pursuers at bay', and that coots regularly raise the abandoned chicks of eagles (the moral of the latter being to look after other people's children – no moral for the former is given).

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<sup>19</sup> *Asterix chez les Bretons* Gisciny and Uderzo, 1965

Thomas Sternberg in his 'The Dialect and Folklore of Northamptonshire (1851), writes about hares' feet as a cure and preventative for the 'rheumatiz' while 'the bone of a hare's foot... mitigateth the cramp'. He also claims that 'the running of a hare along the main street of a village forebodes a fire in the immediate vicinity'.

Anyhow, one theory is that it is the pre-Roman association of hares and chickens – and their eggs - with spiritual matters that led to the two being linked together, and eventually with Easter. At least until rabbits got in on the act.

Rabbits, are relative latecomers, and were introduced from southern Europe, especially Spain, for food and fur by the Romans. They died out when the Romano-British Empire fell, and had to be re-introduced nearly a thousand years later by the Normans and their descendants, who brought over farmed rabbits from their French estates.



At the eastern end of the upper churchyard, if you peer over the wall and through the trees, you can see [lumps and bumps in the fields](#), some of which are the remains of a long-lost

medieval manor house. Although very little of the house itself is left, the large '[pillow mounds](#)' nearer the churchyard wall are [medieval rabbit warrens](#) linked to the old manor. Indeed, what is now Manor Farmhouse across the road used to be called Warren Farm.

The geographical journey taken by rabbits is mirrored in their various names over time: until Victorian times rabbits were known as coney, from the Norman French *conis / coniz*, derived from Latin *cuniculus* meaning a tunnel, although it's also thought (the Romans definitely thought) that this originally came from Iberian-Celtic for a 'little dog'.

The word 'rabbit' emerged in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was originally the term for a baby coney, probably from the northern French word *robète*, meaning something little. The word bunny doesn't arise until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, first as a Scottish word for either a rabbit or squirrel. Place names with coney (originally rhyming with money), cunny, warren, clapper, pillow and burrow are often associated with old rabbit farms. Bunny, the [village](#) in Nottinghamshire, however, has nothing to do with rabbits.

Rabbits didn't do well in the English climate. They were an expensive luxury, so warrens were needed to protect them from the environment, and guard them from medieval poachers. These man-made warrens often came with moats and manned guard houses – you can see the remains of these too in the field next to the church. You had to be seriously rich (either as an individual or a monastery) to have had both rabbit warrens and fishponds like those in Gretton. These rabbit castles with their armed guards led to the idea that rabbits, although in reality delicate, rather fancied themselves as royalty, and medieval manuscripts often have 'marginalia' pictures of [militaristic killer rabbits](#), riding dogs and beating up people.



Like the Romans, the Normans and their descendants also kept rabbits for meat and fur, and, under medieval religious rules, the babies had the 'advantage' of being classed as fish so could be eaten on Fridays and throughout Lent.

As well as Gretton's rabbit warrens, there were other 'coneygrees' at Harringworth, Deene Park and East Carlton. Rushton's [Triangular Lodge](#) – with all its religious symbolism – was theoretically built as no more than housing for the warrener responsible for Thomas Tresham's

rabbit farm. It is apparently referred to as [The Warryner's Lodge](#) in old documents from the Rushton estate. Northamptonshire and Rutland have loads of medieval and early modern documents recording both protecting rabbits and, especially later, attempts to wipe out any that escaped before they did too much damage to crops.

However, it was several hundred years before rabbits [escaped and adapted to English habitats](#), a development that led to their crashing in value (and class) and quickly becoming pests. This eventually led to the deliberate introduction of [myxomatosis](#), a flea and mosquito-transmitted disease originally from South America (where it causes little disease in local rabbit species). The original virus caused a more than 90% mortality in European rabbits, and a crash in rabbit populations in the 1960s. I remember walking to primary school and seeing young rabbits staggering out of hedgerows and dropping dead, literally at my feet. To this day regular epidemics keep the British rabbit population at about half of what it was in the early 1950s. What's more, the disease has also been detected occasionally in hares, suggesting that some strains of the virus might not be a host-specific as is generally thought.



## APRIL

### April 2025: Bumblebees

In late March and April, you often see large bumble bees not just feeding on flowers but purposefully zig-zagging about, exploring flowerpots, 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<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, until about a hundred years ago they were usually called not bumble but humble bees<sup>21</sup> – 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.

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

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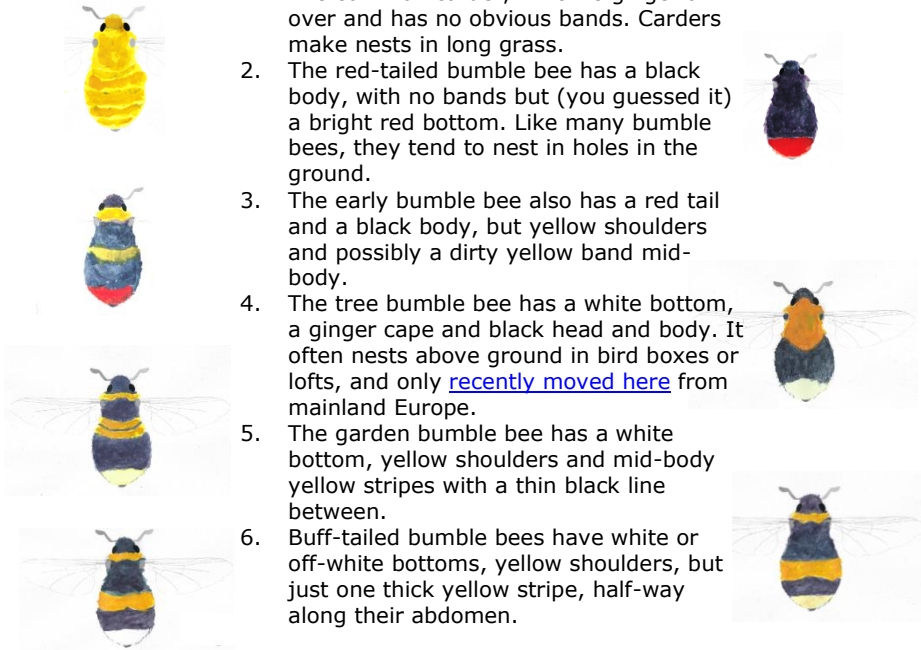
<sup>20</sup> The Old English word 'bum' meant boom (pronounce the 'u' in bum northern style to see how that works), so a bum-ble meant a little boom or a buzz or hum

<sup>21</sup> Of course that's humble as in hum, not humble as in humility (Latin *humilis* = lowly, linked to *humus* = soil).

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<sup>22</sup> 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.
  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.
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<sup>22</sup> 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

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.

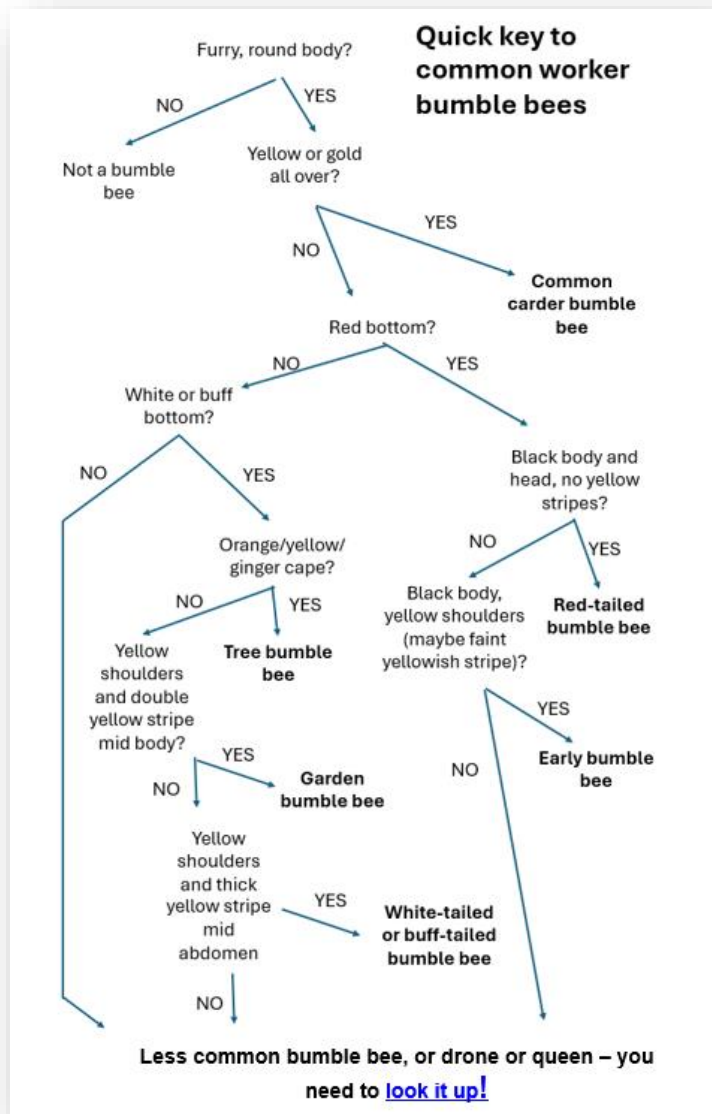
Like all insects, bumble bees are under threat from loss of their habitats and the use of pesticides. If you want to help the bumble bees<sup>23</sup>, then encourage a range of flowers (especially clumps of perennials), vegetables (allowed to develop flowers), and flowering shrubs and trees in your [garden](#), and don't use insecticides

(including [spot-ons](#) on your 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.



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<sup>23</sup> 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>



Easter Sunday, April 2025 wildlife in the churchyard



## April 2026: Voles, mice and Lady Frances Hatton's memorial

Around the edges of the upper and lower churchyards, where the longer grass grows and there's shrub and tree cover, both bank voles and wood mice live but are seldom seen. Bank voles have glossy chestnut coats with silver bellies, and, like all voles, small ears and eyes. The wood mice are a bit bigger and have smart grey-brown backs, cream bellies, large ears and eyes and very long tails. Well, most of them do – some have stumpy tails as, when grabbed, their tail skin detaches, leaving owls and foxes with nothing but an empty glove finger while the rest of the mouse escapes.



Although bank voles can climb, they largely scurry along the ground and it's the wood mice who are the real athletes. They climb bushes and trees (having a stumpy tail probably hampers this a bit, though) and can jump vertically about 30cm from a standing start – relative to size, that's a bit like, say, a curate leaping 30 feet straight up.

As the name suggests, wood mice (despite sometimes being called field mice) are found mainly in woodland and hedgerows, where they eat seeds, grain, berries, some leaves and small insects. Bank voles, not surprisingly, are found more in grassy banks along hedgerows and field margins, where there is lots of greenery for them to eat. They can also be found in woodland and forests, but only as long as there's enough green ground cover – so traditional mixed woodland is good but not dark coniferous plantations.



Wood mice are largely nocturnal (hence the big eyes and ears), and on infrared night cameras their hyper-reflective eyes are bright discs that bounce across the ground and along branches, a bit like those bouncing balls that help you to sing-along in old black and white movies<sup>24</sup>. Bank voles are more morning and evening animals, although they'll also venture out at other times, tunnelling at ground level through the grass. Both voles and mice build nests out of grass down small tunnels in the ground, and at this time of year they are beginning to produce their first litters of 5-6 pink, naked, baked-bean-like babies.

Where the grass is allowed to grow longer and over a larger area, we sometimes find field (or short tailed) voles, especially beyond the lime trees in the upper churchyard. They make tunnels through the long grass and have shared latrines – little bare patches you'll sometimes find lined with clipped grass and covered in their small droppings. It's field voles that the barn owls quartering the meadows further down the valley are hunting. They are bigger and greyer than bank voles, and if you hold one in your hand, they are much more likely to give you a nip than is a more placid bank vole. Wood mice are similarly feisty. Although each has its preferred habitat, all three are found together where the habitats of woodland, bank and long grass abut, illustrating how 'edge habitats' often have a larger diversity of life than 'core' or 'interior' habitats.

Inside the church we occasionally see evidence of house mice, although the 'frugal tea', of cake and biscuit crumbs left after Sunday services and Saturday coffee mornings means there aren't many and, like [John Betjemen's church mouse](#), they 'live lean and lone'.

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<sup>24</sup> Writing this sent me down a rabbit – or possibly vole – hole, reading up on bouncing sing-along balls. Apparently they originated in the 1920s, through a technique developed by the [Fleischer brothers](#), famous for creating Betty Boo and later Popeye cartoons. There's an online talk on the evolution of [bouncing ball sing-alongs](#) by Ester Morgan-Ellis, and expert on community singing.



On the north side of the chancel, where the crumbs certainly never reach, is a memorial to Lady Frances Hatton, second wife to the first [Viscount Christopher Hatton](#). Frances, Christopher and several of their children, are buried in the crypt below the chancel. Their nine years marriage was full of hope but sadness. As the memorial explains, their five children, Susan, Elizabeth, Francis, Elizabeth and Christopher Henry, died in infancy and then Frances herself died,

in 1684, of '*variolis*' – smallpox. Smallpox was ever-present, but waxed and waned and there had been a [wave of cases in London](#) starting in the early 1680s, which had spread northwards causing notably huge mortality when it reached northwest England and finally the Isle of Man in [1684-5](#). Frances, based at rural Kirby Hall, was somewhat protected but would have had constant visitors from London – some of them doubtless rich people with the means of fleeing disease in London, although smallpox was so common, diaries of the time describe many people treating smallpox, unlike plague, with near nonchalance. Unfortunately, Frances was especially susceptible to severe disease as she was pregnant again.

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was no way of preventing smallpox. It was another forty years before [Lady Mary Wortley Montagu](#), not yet born when Frances died, and herself a smallpox survivor, campaigned for variolation in Britain. Mary, traveling as wife to the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, had seen its use in Turkey. Although there was no knowledge of germs at the time everyone knew that you didn't get smallpox twice. The idea of variolation, which seems to have originated in China and India, was to deliberately infect healthy people with smallpox by rubbing a small amount of scab material into the skin, followed by careful nursing. Smallpox was usually transmitted by respiratory aerosols, and natural spread led to pneumonia as well as generalised infection. The subsequent disease had a

mortality rate of around 30% and often left survivors with scars, disfigurement or even blindness. Skin variolation, however, caused only a local infection and carried a 1-2% risk of death – higher than we would accept nowadays, but when smallpox was rife, a risk worth taking.

Around sixty years after that, in 1798, [Edward Jenner](#), a Gloucestershire GP who had already made a scientific name

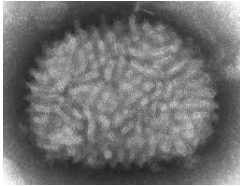
June 18, 1787, I examined the nest of a Hedge-sparrow, which then contained a Cuckoo's and three Hedge-sparrow's eggs. On inspecting it the day following, I found the bird had hatched, but that the nest now contained only a young Cuckoo and one young Hedge-sparrow. The nest was placed so near the extremity of a hedge, that I could distinctly see what was going forward in it; and, to my astonishment, saw the young Cuckoo, though so newly hatched, in the act of turning out the young Hedge-sparrow.

for himself through his work on cuckoos, published '[An inquiry into the causes and effects of the variolæ vaccinae, ...known by the name of the cow pox.](#)' Jenner had noticed that milkmaids rarely got smallpox and reasoned this might be owing to their exposure to cowpox - scabbed ulcers on cows' teats that looked a bit like smallpox. He therefore used material from cowpox, in Latin *variolæ vaccinae* (from *vacca* = cow), to inoculate against smallpox. Further experiments showed cowpox was both effective and very much safer than variolation<sup>25</sup>. Some sixty years after that, when Louis Pasteur, the French pioneer of the germ theory of disease and of pasteurisation fame, invented the next immunisations, in his case against rabies, he suggested that all such treatments be called 'vaccines' in honour of Jenner's cowpox discovery. It was the use of vaccines, combined with the detection and isolation of new cases, that led to the global eradication of smallpox in the late 1970s. Smallpox is

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<sup>25</sup> Others, such as [Benjamin Jesty](#), had noticed the same, and done similar experiments. But Jesty, worried at being laughed at or worse, didn't tell anyone until after Jenner's vaccine had taken off. A government panel recognised his work, however, and gave him some rewards later.

still the only global human disease to have been completely eradicated, although polio came close.



What has any of this to do with bank voles and wood mice in the churchyard? Well, cowpox is actually very rare in cattle. Even Jenner, some 230 years ago, remarked that it was difficult to find material for his new 'vaccine'. We now know that that's because the virus that causes cowpox isn't really a virus of cows. Rather, it circulates mainly in voles and wood mice – infection (causing no obvious disease) is very common in them, and sometimes jumps into other hosts, occasionally cows. The amount of virus in these small rodents is too small for direct transmission to people, so there's no need to worry about our voles and mice. If you do see cowpox, the disease, nowadays it's most likely to be in a cat who has been hunting wild rodents.

So, although nobody knew it at the time, the means to prevent poor Frances's early death from smallpox was constantly around her in the wildlife of the gardens of her home at [Kirby Hall](#) and remains around her now, where she's buried in the Hatton vault under the church. Bank voles and wood mice are not only attractive animals and important for their role in the churchyard and surrounding ecosystem – not least as food for the foxes and tawny owls - but I think we owe them a big thank you for, albeit inadvertently, infecting some cows over two hundred years ago and making modern human life around the world much safer and healthier.





Wildlife in St James's churchyards

