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. We have brought several years' worth of these posts together to build up a month-by-month diary of what is, or was, going on. For no particular reason, we started in Ma

(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)

MAY

May: Dandelions

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

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

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

Food and drink: Lots of animals, including people, eat dandelions. The leaves were used in Victorian salads (blanche them to remove bitterness) and fermented for dandelion and burdock. The flower petals are used in dandelion wine (best if collected on May Day), and the roots can be ground and used as a coffee substitute.

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

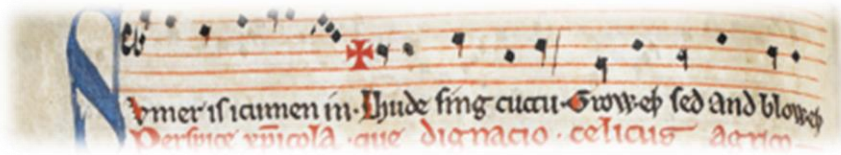
Rubber: The white sap is latex: The Kazakh dandelion produces so much white latex that it is used to make rubber. British dandelions don't produce so much but have been used as a natural, soothing sticking plaster on cuts and sores.

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



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

Sumer is icumen in	*Summer has come in*[1]
Lhude sing cuccu	*Loudly sing cuckoo*
Groweþ sed	*Groweth seed*
and bloweþ med	*And bloometh meadow*
And springeþ þe wde nu	*And springeth the wood now*
Sing cuccu!	*Sing cuckoo!*

Interestingly, the manuscript has not only these English words but, beneath them, in red letters (indicating greater importance) Latin lyrics about Good Friday – these add a semblance of religious propriety to the English song (that is may be a bit rude in the second verse, depending on how you translate *bucke uerteþ*) and 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 wing shape make them look a bit like a plump sparrowhawk), and can sometimes hear one as his song echoes

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1 '*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 an fascinating discussion of this song in her book '*A History of England in 25 Poems*'.

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 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 (along with wild garlic or ramsons – so three edible-to-us plants this month). 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 it out of its bottom (we've all done it).

We also have cuckoo pint in the churchyard, also known as Lords and Ladies and a whole load of other names. The leaves of this native lily have been pushing through since late March, but in May its hooded, -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… they are also called May bugs because it's from May onwards that you will see and hear them zooming loudly about at night,

banging into windows or even your head (one thwacked into my head in the churchyard the other night). Hence their other name – doodlebugs - although I'm not sure which came first, the doodlebug 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 suspect it more likely comes from their cockerel-like behaviour and the way they strut about. Anyhow, you can tell the males from females by the numbers of segments on the combs (seven for a boy and six for a girl), although a lot of the time they are folded up into clubs (as in this picture). While the adults eat leaves and are pretty harmless, the larvae (fat white grubs with brown heads) eat the roots of grasses and other plants and can do lots of damage to crops. However, these grubs, along with earthworms, are a favourite food of both badgers and moles – both of which munch happily on the grubs in the churchyard. Apparently (unlike cuckoo flowers, wild garlic and garlic mustard, I've not tried this) the grubs taste fine as a soup or when fried lightly in butter...

May: The churchyard at night

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

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

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

hedgehogs in the churchyard, even though they are so common elsewhere around the village.

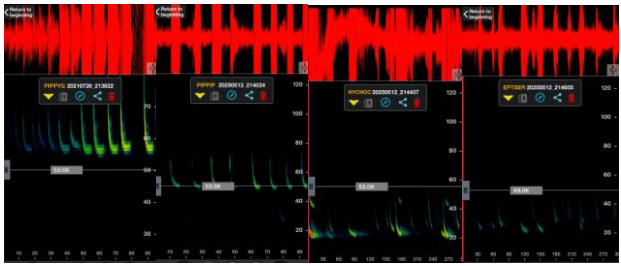
Not seen quite so frequently – probably because there's not so much food for them in the churchyard - are foxes. Having said which, like the badgers, they also eat grubs and worms. Maybe, though, they also occasionally catch a church vole or mouse. Our foxes seem pretty healthy, probabably beause they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

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

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

Not picked up by the cameras, but easily seen on a evening walk, are bats. The summer bat roost in the church porch, while still not as active as it was a few years ago, survives, as evidenced by the fresh bat poo on the wall and floor. We've not managed to see many coming in and out, but there's plenty of bats of different sizes to be seen in the churchyard,

along church gap and on the village green. The different species, like birds, can be identified from their calls, although unlike in birds the purpose of these is echolocation (navigation) not territoriality or courtship. To hear these high frequency calls you need a special detector that slows them down to within human hearing range: these calls can also be made into 'sonograms'. In less than an hour, one evening last week, we detected common and soprano pipistrelles (the church porch roost is largely soprano pipistrelles), noctules and serotines.



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

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

JUNE

June: Swifts

There are two types of swifts flying around the churchyard and village in June: one is the bird and the other is a moth. These wonderful, screaming, bow-like birds are back from Africa and building their nests. Swift numbers in the UK have halved over the last 20 years - partly through a reduction in insects to eat, partly disruption to migration routes across and up from Africa, but also a lack of places to nest as we block the holes under our eaves where they build their nests.

Swifts hunting insects

Swifts only land to nest; they sleep and mate in flight. Their nests are of air-borne strands of plant material, bound together with saliva. Fledglings jump from the nest - and don't land again for several years. If they do crash-land they need help as they can't take off from the ground until much older (and even then it's difficult). Iif you see a grounded swift then simply pick it up and help it back into the air.

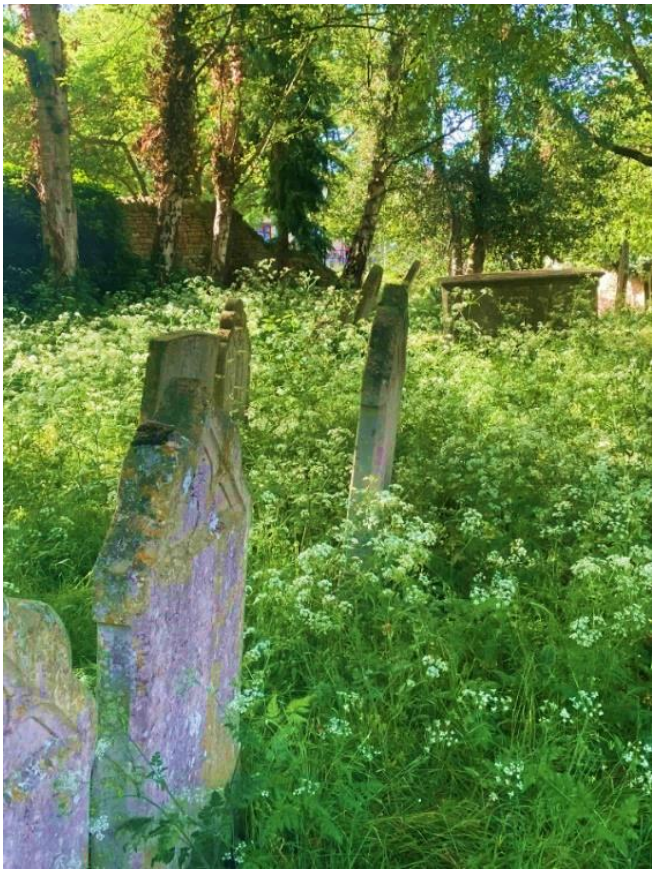
Our other swifts are more active at, and just after, dusk. These are the common swift moths. The adults fly in May and June, the females hovering to lay their eggs, which drop to the ground. The small white caterpillars hatch in July and tunnel underground, to spend the summer and winter eating the roots 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: A morning's walk

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



Like an orchestra warming up, the birds were loudly singing over each other: house sparrows chattered and squabbled in the hedges; a blackbird sang a rich operatic aria; wrens were piccolo trilling; a robin sang his melancholic ballad in a minor key; blue tits shrilled 'tsee-tsee-tsee', and a great tit occasionally shouted 'teacher!'; an innumerate song thrush, like a child practicing on a recorder, was repeating melodic

phrases, sometimes twice and sometimes four times but rarely the traditional three; and above them all, a lone blackcap warbled a waterfall. The cawing rooks and the ' Jack! Jack!'-ing jackdaws were arguing, while the dismayed woodpigeons cooed woo-WOO-woo woo-woo (to the rhythm of 'we've ALL gone bonkers') and the collared doves gently replied woo-WOO-woo ('I TOLD you'). An indistinct chiff-chaff chanted its name.

Overhead the swallows, house martins and swifts – all recently flown in from Africa and now with nests and young to care for - hunted the morning insects rising up from the long grass and trees. The tall meadow foxtail grass, swayed with the breeze. Among the grass was an occasional yellow rattle, just starting to flower. This is an important native meadow plant, deliberately seeded, as it parasitises grass roots and allows other wildflowers the space to grow and bloom. It's also host to the caterpillars of several moths, 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.

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

only if eaten. Not toxic, but painful if touched, of course, are the nettles – but these are very important sources of nectar for many insects including butterflies. Indeed, we encourage patches of nettles, especially in sun-dappled areas, as their leaves are also important food for caterpillars: red admirals, small tortoiseshell, peacock caterpillars love nettles, and the adults will all be seen in the churchyard later in the summer – especially on the Buddleia.

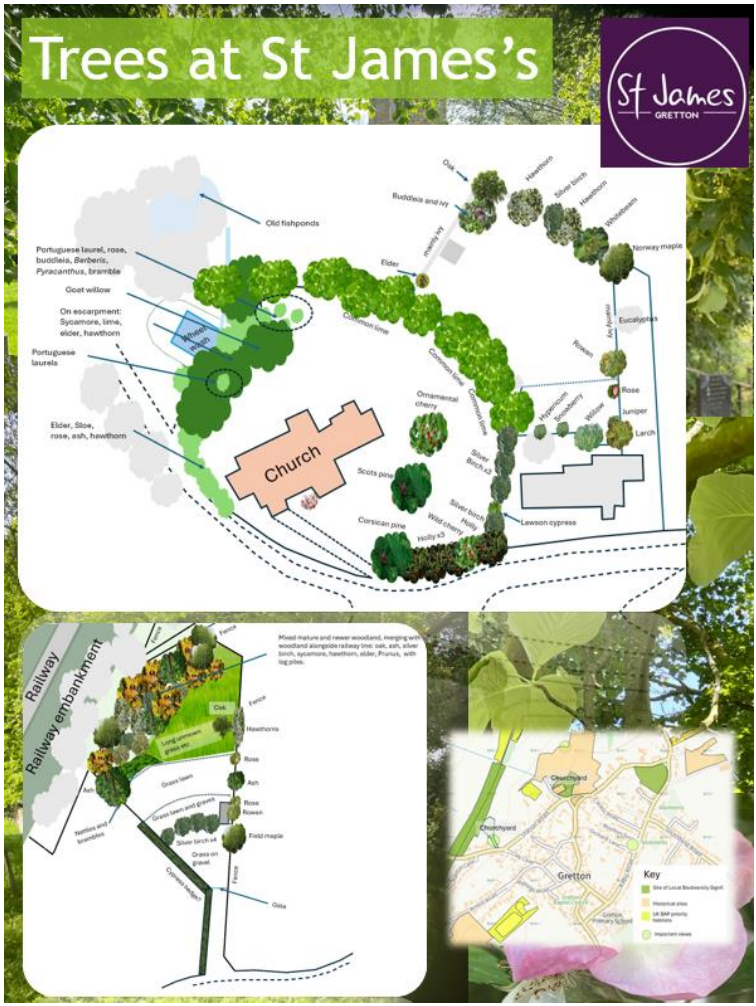
The morning was sunny but cool, and the only butterflies about were some orange tips and a green veined white. Having overwintered as chrysalises, these butterflies would have been looking for both a mate and garlic mustard, or cuckoo flowers, to lay their eggs on, in damper shaded areas around the north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

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

JULY

July: Wildflowers and St James's flower festival


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


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

July: Some summer wildflowers

There are lots of yellow and gold flowers in the short grass on the way into church - a few of them are dandelions, but most are a bit smaller and, frankly, difficult to identify without a close look with a hand lens.

I think we have autumn hawkbit (smooth leaves, with finger-like lobes, and a flower head that tapers into the stem), common catsear or flatweed (hairier, less lobed leaves – apparently like a cat's ear - and flower head bell-like to the stem), and mouse eared hawkweed (very hairy, plain leaves and a bowl-like flower head). Hawkweeds and hawkbits get their names from the belief that, as Pliny the Elder put it some 2000 years ago in *Naturalis historia*, 'the hawk tears it open and sprinkles its eyes with the juice, and so dispels any dimness of sight of which it is apprehensive'. Hmmm… Elsewhere, the taller plant with similar flowers but branched stems and beech-like leaves is nipplewort, which takes its name from its flower buds. And of

course the churchyard also contains lots of groundsel. All of these produce nectar used by butterflies, moths and other insects, and on sunny days can be covered in stunning marmalade hoverflies. Groundsel flowerheads 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[3], 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

[3] 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 Flora Britannica, the recipe has been lost). It was, however, traditionally used to provide the extra strong yellow to double Gloucester cheese, and can be used as a dye. And it is still sometimes used as a food and drink flavouring[2].

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*[4], referring to marsh dwellers. In herbal medicine it is used particularly to stop bleeding, hence its mediaeval herbalist name *herba militaris*. Apparently,

[4] 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 millefolium* 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.

July: 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 fish ponds further down.

The larvae spend 2-3 years underwater, going through several moults. They are fearsome predators eating tadpoles and even small fish. Finally they climb up a stem or leaf (they don't have pupae) and the adults emerge, fully formed but soft and pale (the blurry pictures here are because it was raining!). It may take several hours, during which they are easy prey for birds, before their wings and body fully unfurl and harden – then they fly off leaving behind the 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 green-houses to control aphids - then they escaped. There were worries they could outcompete – and even eat - our local ladybirds, but they seem not to have done that so far. It's harlequins we get forming huge clusters in the vestry in autumn (although other ladybirds can do the same). Harlequins are very variable in colour, but can be identified from often having a distinctive black (if sometimes broken) 'W' on their white heads, and usually having orange legs.

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

AUGUST

August: Wasps

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

These queens initially feed on nectar from flowers, doing a bit of pollinating as they go. As soon as she's found somewhere safe to found her colony, 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 waists of adult wasps mean that they can't eat anything other than high sugar and protein liquid food, so in return for being fed insects, the grubs produce a nectar-like substance to feed their big sisters. Hence, if you're spring picnicking, any bothersome wasps will most likely be after meat rather than sweet things from your spread. By late summer and autumn, however, most of the grubs will be pupae and so no longer producing liquid food for their big sisters. Now you will find the adults after your sweet drinks and jam sandwiches. You can help with a survey of what wasps are eating when and where by filling out this online form.

The males – mainly around in late summer – do nothing (of course) except dawdle about drinking nectar from flowers, pollinating as they go, and, if they are lucky, mating with new queens in the autumn - then die. The males are docile

and have longer droopy antennae. And (the stinger being a modified ovipositor –an egg-laying device – so lacking) they couldn't sting you even if they could be bothered to.

The two most common small wasps you can see in the churchyard and gardens at this time of year are common wasps and German wasps. If you look at them closely you can tell them apart by their faces; the common wasps have a teddy bear-like black anchor (above left), while the German wasps (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[5]. 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.

[5] 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 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.

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: 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 sparrows 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, meaning 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 for their young.

Of course, there might be further clues as to why sparrows seem to be doing relatively OK in Gretton, 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, 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.'

Rather less transactional, 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[6]? 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 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 peanuts 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[7] (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 spreading disease. And some of the bacteria in bird droppings can infect people too, so wash your hands afterwards. Anyhow -

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[6] The original Greek says 'assarion', a small, low-value bronze coin, variously translated into English as a farthing or penny.

[7] 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 would be London prices for Edwardian breadcrumbs.

moderation is, as usual, key. Just enough food to attract in small-ish numbers of birds, and not enough to attract non-avian visitors.

Because 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 hotter 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 having 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: 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 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 AngloSaxon poem:

Sumor sunwlitegost 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 the parson 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 for mousing on a Sunday[8].

[8] '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 already 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: Conkers

Horse chestnuts originally came from Turkey, and their first mention in Britain is of one growing in John Tradescant's garden in the 1630s. Originally grown in private gardens and estates 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 out do seem to repel clothes moths, so it might be worth putting some in your wardrobe.

As everyone knows, baking competition conkers, or soaking them in vinegar, to make them harder is cheating. But keeping them in the wardrobe for a year is natural and demonstrates patience – a virtue - and 'yearsies' are well… well 'ard.

Saponins also have soap-like properties – and some shampoos contain horse chestnut extracts - so you could even use conkers to clean yourself up after a particulalry energetic conkers battle…

October: 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, mewing their whistle-like 'peeooee'. The low autumn sun shine 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 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:

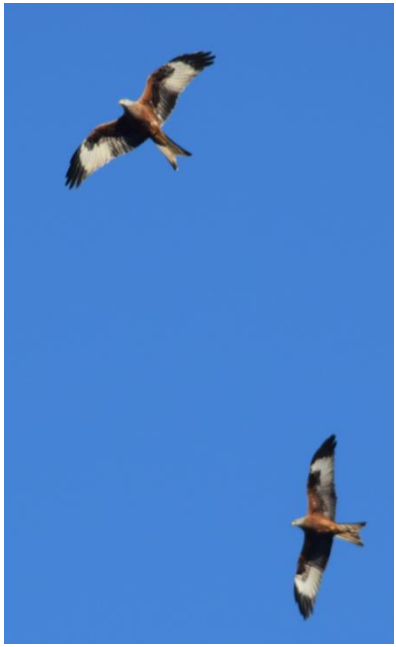
Ther cam a kyte, whil that they were so wrothe,
And baar awey the boon bitwixe hem bothe.

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[9]. 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 as useful, like many other important occupations it 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 not having 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.

9 *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 his 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 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 fatherly redemption, is named after the birds.

NOVEMBER

November: Poppies

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

Corn poppies 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: 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 pottered 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 includes 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 street lamps[10]. *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 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, Sarah.

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 might come into the church. William Wager, writing in 1500 described a robin 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:

[10] The robin's song has therefore been mistaken for nightingale's, just as collared doves' 'whoo **whoo** whoo' gets confused with cuckoos' despite its three, not two, syllable song.

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 Fallodon, 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 street lights 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 4th 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.

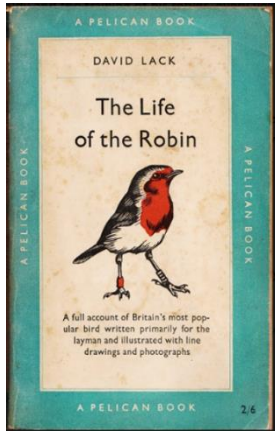
Robins were originally called ruddocks, then red-breasts, then robin redbreasts; Shakespeare used all three names. Alliterative Robin alone, the diminutive of Robert, doesn't commonly appear until the 18th century. The robin is one of very few British birds that has adopted a human name – magpie, jackdaw 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 17th 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*[11] *Herrick is!*



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

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

[11] I love that Robert becomes Robin in this last line.

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[12]. 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*

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

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*.'

DECEMBER

December: Holly

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

Given this complicated history, it's not surprising that holly's traditions and mythology often blend pre-Christian 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, þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare, and an ax in his oþer…'.*

The holly bundle ('holyn bobbe') is a symbol of peace – unlike the axe...

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

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

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

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

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

December: 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 may come in handy if someone has an accident parking on your roof on Christmas Eve. The classic Finnish dish is, he told me, *poronkäristys*. *Poro* is reindeer and *käristys* 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 (that can be hired to spend a few weeks in small pens 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 frying pan to get rid of the melting water, then add butter, salt and black pepper. Simmer for about one hour. Serve with mashed potatoes and 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 poronkäristys, 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.

JANUARY

January: Lichen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FEBRUARY

February: Snowdrops

When does spring start? The season takes it's name from the verb to spring – the springing up of flowers and crops after winter. It's also a fairly new term, as up until around 600 years ago the usual English word was Lencten or Lenten, simply meaning the lengthening of days (and from which we get the word Lent). Whatever, as 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 noticibly lighter mornings and evenings, include snowdrops springing up from fresh green, if often frosty, grass banks. Their scientific name is *Galanthus nivalis* (*Gal-anthus* is from the Greek for milk-flower, and *nivalis* from the Latin for snow), but they are sometimes also called Candlemass flowers. Snowdrops symbolise hope and purity, and their flowers used to be scattered on altars on Candlemas Day. Some, at least, of our churchyard snowdrops were out in time for Candlemass, the 2nd of February, which this year (2025) was the first Sunday in February. In some ways this is not such a good sign, though, as It seems that snowdrops now bloom, on average, a month earlier than they did 70 years ago – a sign of creeping global warming.

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

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

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

As Wordsworth put it:

'Chaste Snowdrop, venturous harbinger of Spring…'

MARCH

March: Hedgehogs

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

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

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

If it's warm enough, hedgehogs might start 'courting' in March, but the real 'rut' doesn't usually occur until at least April, and most babies (hoglets) are born, after around 30 days pregnancy, between May and July. However, courtship and pregnancies continue until the autumn and very late pregnancies can produce young that are too small and thin to survive hibernation. So, the busiest times for rescue centres are often early spring with sick and thin hedgehogs and late autumn with hoglets too small to hibernate.

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

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

Hedgehogs' main problems are people. Although they can run surprisingly fast, motorcars are the most obvious cause of the dead hedgehogs you might come across. But probably more important are the walls and fences that stop them moving between gardens (they cover a considerable distance each night searching for food), the general decrease in insects as food caused by our use of insecticides, and slug pellets in gardens. They don't have that many predators- their spines and ability to roll into a ball are really good defences. They will occasionally be eaten by foxes (although most reports are of foxes maiming hedgehogs by grabbing

an unprotected leg, or eating road-killed hedgehogs), and rats often kill their young in the nest. It's thought that badgers are the hedgehog's main predator as a badger's strong claws can unroll a hedgehog, exposing its non-spiny and defenceless belly. However, while there are plenty of reports of badgers eating hedgehogs, they are still not an important part of the badger's diet, and there's no evidence that badgers are a significant cause of hedgehog mortality.

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

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

APRIL

April: Bumblebees

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

How do you know it's a bumble bee? Bumble bees are bigger, rounder and furrier than honeybees. Their name comes from the word bumble, which originally meant to

hum[13]. Indeed, until about a hundred years ago they were usually called not bumble but humble bees[14] – 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

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

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

the anthers, while others have been known to chew on leaves and stems to encourage flowering. Bumble bees also have an electrostatic charge (caused by friction between their furry bodies and the air) and this makes sure the pollen sticks to them - although, like honeybees, they will work hard to stuff as much pollen as possible into the baskets on their hind legs to take back to their nests.

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

Worker[15] 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

[15] 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

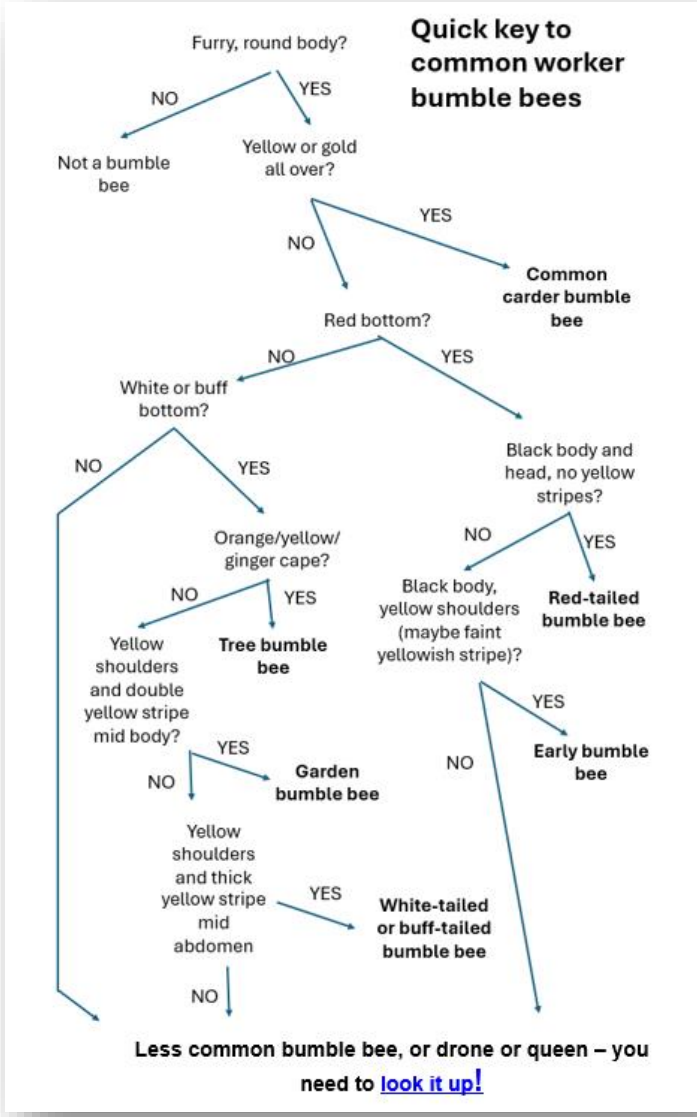
just one thick yellow stripe, half-way along their abdomen.

7. White tailed bumble bees are very similar to buff tailed, but are maybe have whiter bottoms.

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

Like all insects, bumble bees are under threat from loss of their habitats and the use of pesticides. If you want to help the bumble bees[16], 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.

16 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


Quick key to common worker bumble bees
Furry, round body?
NO
YES
Not a bumble bee
Yellow or gold all over?
YES
NO
Common carder bumble bee
Red bottom?
NO
YES
White or buff bottom?
NO
YES
Orange/yellow/ ginger cape?
NO
YES
Yellow shoulders and double yellow stripe mid body?
YES
NO
Garden bumble bee
Tree bumble bee
Yellow shoulders and thick yellow stripe mid abdomen
YES
White-tailed or buff-tailed bumble bee
NO
Black body and head, no yellow stripes?
NO
YES
Red-tailed bumble bee
Black body, yellow shoulders (maybe faint yellowish stripe)?
YES
Early bumble bee
NO
Less common bumble bee, or drone or queen – you need to look it up!

Easter Sunday 2025 wildlife