

The Wick Country Park

NOVEMBER 2002

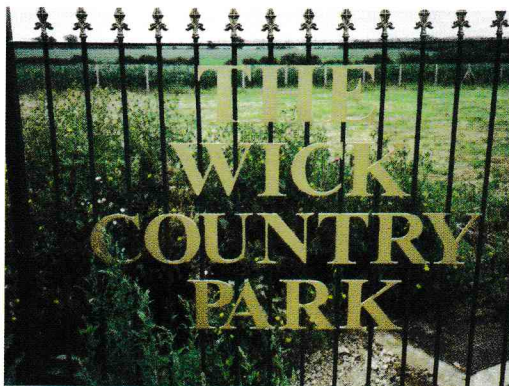
News

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This the fifth newsletter produced to keep the local people of Wickford up to date on developments at the country park. Even more progress has been made over the summer and autumn.



Smart gates welcome the visitor and above the Diggers depart! March, 2002.

THE PROJECT SO FAR

You may remember that in the last edition the lake had been dug and filled and an in-line pond had been created by building a weir across the brook that runs through the site. Gates were being installed and a footpath was due to be constructed along the access road from Tresco Way down to the park entrance and the car park. Details of the latest work is contained in the Rangers Report.

Volunteer activity was also highlighted in the May newsletter and we are delighted to report that not only have individuals come forward to help the Countryside Ranger with some of the early hands-on management, but a Friends of the Wick Country Park has also been established. Their first bulletin, entitled Skylark, contains information on planned events and has a membership form attached which, we hope, as many of you as possible will use to join the group.



ITS OPENING, AT LAST!

The Friends are also helping the Council with the organisation of a milestone event for the park the official opening to the public. It has been scheduled for: **Sunday, 8th December at 11am.**

There will be the usual speeches and words of genuine optimism for such a wonderful amenity for the people of the area. Then guided walks will point out the detail of much of the work that has already been done and explain what is still to come.

A marquee will serve refreshments and provide shelter in the event of bad weather.



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Rangers Report

After all of the disruption to the site, following the digging of the lake and pond, and the earth mound formed from the excavated soil, the ground had to be thoroughly harrowed to break up the ruts and huge lumps of clay. The result of the monotonous to-ing and fro-ing by the tractor was a very smooth tilth that will make for comfortable walking and future cutting when the park is open.

Alder trees were planted in one of the newly created ponds and will eventually grow tall and luxuriant in the saturated conditions. They have specialised nodules on their roots that contain a chemical very like the haemoglobin that we have in our blood. It enables the tree roots to scavenge any available oxygen to help in the trees growth. Most other species of tree could not survive continuous waterlogging.

Common reed is another example of a plant that thrives in watery situations. In mid July Countryside Ranger, Paul Bown, and volunteers from the Friends group planted over two thousand bundles of reeds across the shallower areas in the south and west of the lake. Actually, planted is a deceptive term. The hessian-wrapped bundles were



dropped over the side of a boat and will, in a short space of time, spread their rhizomes through the hessian and into the mud, colonising most of the shallows. The resulting reedbed will provide a very valuable habitat for a wide range of animals and birds, above and below the waterline. A sign of the biodiversity to come was the number of dragon and damselflies that were settling on the emergent reed stems even as they were being dropped in the water by Paul and his team! More unwelcome wildlife has since taken its toll of the top shoots Canada geese on the prowl for food found that the reeds were just about the only thing on the menu and nibbled a high percentage down to the roots. They'll recover though.

Up until this autumn the only way to access the meadow to the east of the brook was by scrambling down and up the steep banks. Now

though, a smart steel and wooden bridge spans the brook. It will enable a tractor and trailer across to cut the grass and carry maintenance equipment, and provide access to pedestrians. Two other pedestrian bridges will soon cross the brook, at either end of its route through the park. They will be constructed by the volunteers, using some of the large wooden poles that once supported the overhead electricity cables that were taken down last year.

Before the Council could consider allowing public access to the site it had to make sure that a suitable path system was in place. Otherwise, at the first drop of rain, the extensive areas of bare soil would have been turned into slippery mud. Work on an Easy Access Trail began in September. A route was cut around the perimeter of the 50 acre site, with an adjoining track running down each side of the brook to link the bridges. The total length of the trail is almost 2000 metres. The surface will be of graded pathmix which can be wetted and rolled to form an even, durable surface, suitable for wheelchairs. The footpath from Tresco Way down to the park entrance is Tarmac. Opposite the Tresco Way roundabout the path has been extended to make it safer for wheelchair users, and people pushing baby carriers, to reach the footpath.

A must do task this winter is to plant up the woodland across the eight-acre mound of soil derived from the lake excavation. The young trees will be vulnerable to visitor pressure for a number of years, particularly through trampling and compaction of the soil around their tender roots. Using rustic timber, contractors





have almost finished fencing off the woodland to help prevent this sort of damage until the plants are well enough established. They will also be fencing around certain sections of the lake bank and along the ditches. There are good health and safety reasons for doing this, as well as protecting the newly planted hedges and thickets.

Volunteers

Over the last five months local volunteers have tackled some important jobs, helping the Countryside Ranger. So far they have tackled bridge building reed-bed creation, wildlife surveying and

tree planting. We are also involving the local schools in some activities over the next few months, including planting trees in their very own patch of the woodland area. Ranger Paul Bown holds regular work parties on the last Wednesday of every month, from 1 to 3pm. Training, tools and gloves are provided and no previous practical experience is necessary. If you feel like joining in for exercise or pleasure, and preferably both, please phone Paul on 01277 624553 and put your name down.

Below: The reedbed will knit together within a few years to form an important wildlife habitat around the southern part of the lake.

Opposite top: A very solid bridge will enable tractor and maintenance machinery to access the east meadow.

Opposite below: Is it a pond or is it a brook? Both actually. The line of the North Benfleet Brook has been expanded at this point and a weir holds back a good depth of water.

Left: Reed planting in July. Hessian wrapped bundles were dropped in from the boat. In the background the soil has been graded by the harrow to remove the ruts and clods.



Above: Dont worry, well make it fit! Volunteers laying planks across the recycled electricity poles to form a rustic foot bridge, and below, the bridges carry the Easy Access Trail across the brook and ditches along its 2000 metre length.



Wildlife

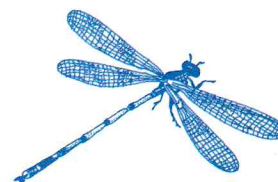
Even before the machines had left from digging the lake and ponds wildlife was moving in. Skylarks were quick to resume territory and signs of badgers nocturnal wanderings were all over. Mallard, tufted duck, cormorant and little grebe used the lake early on, together with heron. Small fish must have colonised quite quickly to attract the kingfisher that has been seen several times over the summer.



The rough grassland provides food and shelter to lots of small mammals, like field mice and voles, so its not surprising that kestrels are regular hunters over the park. Sparrowhawk too, can be seen quartering the hedgerows searching out unsuspecting tits, blackbirds or finches.

There is certainly no shortage of small birds feeding in the park. The disturbance of the soil has given rise to a mass of weedy plants. The seed heads of thistle, teasel, mustard and low growing species like shepherds purse all provide abundant food for goldfinches, chaffinches, linnets and sparrows.

The new areas of water have created a potentially teeming habitat for all sorts of creatures and early indications are that they will be especially good for dragonflies and damselflies. Just this summer weve recorded seven or eight species. The richness of the wildlife in the lake and ponds will depend on them establishing a natural balance before we make any more changes.



The Park takes shape

Planting up the woodland across the eight-acre mound of soil derived from the lake excavation will take place this winter.

Work on an Easy Access Trail began in September. A route was cut around the perimeter of the 50 acre site, with an adjoining track running down each side of the brook to link the bridges. The total length of the trail is almost 2000 metres.



If you would like any further information please contact Paul Bown, the Countryside Ranger on 01277 624553, or Steve Prewer, the Countryside Manager on 01268 550088.



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