

# The Wick Country Park

JULY 2003

# News

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### Friends of Wick Country Park

This independent group was formed to assist the Council in the conservation and future care of the Country Park. They meet bi-monthly at the Abacus Primary School with a representative from Countryside Services to organize events and assist with the Country Park's development.

*Right, sunset, looking west over the large island and below, looking across the North Benfleet brook trail bridge towards the east meadow, with the new fencing in place around an old oak.*



Basildon District Council  
Countryside Services

They will be helping Countryside Services to host the official opening of the Pavilion in the Country Park on Saturday 13th September. If you would like to be involved then please come along to the next meeting in August and find out how you can help. You can also take part in other Friends events and support the group by joining the Friends of the Wick Country Park. The subscription is £3.00 per household or £1.50 for individuals. You will have free admission to many talks and events, and also receive the group's newsletter *The Skylark*. For more information please contact:-

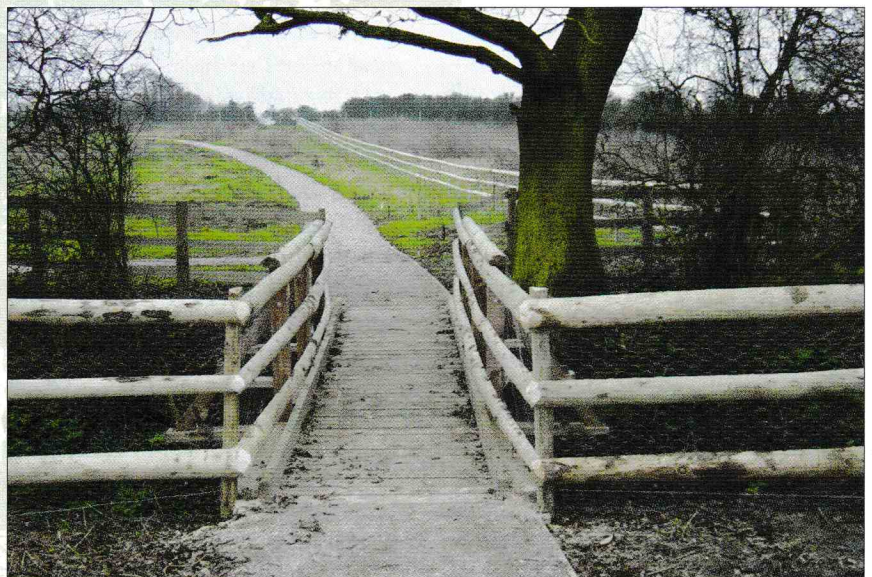
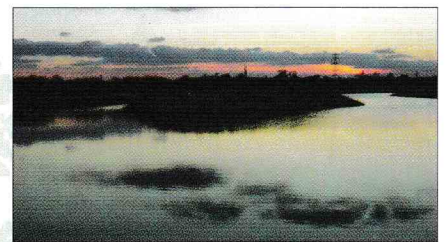
D. Mullender  
31 Tresco Way  
Wickford SS12 9GP

### Wildlife Sightings

The lake started to attract wildlife soon after it was filled in March 2002. Since then, kingfisher, mallard, moorhen, Canada goose and little grebe have been recorded on or around the water. There are certainly some small fish, probably sticklebacks, that have found their way into the lake and provide food for birds, grass

snakes and even dragonfly nymphs. As the reeds grow up around the southern margin even more beneficial habitat will be created and in a few years time we can expect to see, and hear, reed warblers as they move in during the summer months.

There has been a report of a water vole using the pond constructed along the line of the brook. This area of slower moving water provides another type of habitat, compared to the open lake or the static conditions of the other ponds. Where there has been disturbance to the ground by heavy machinery the ruts that were created became small areas of mud and water in early spring. These conditions attracted up to a dozen snipe at any one time as they probed and prodded with their long bills in search of worms and grubs. These birds were on migration to their nesting areas on the moorland of northern England and Scotland.



With the variety of plants and grasses that are now growing across the meadows and around the water areas it's not surprising that flocks of finches, like linnets, goldfinches and chaffinches have been seen throughout the winter feeding on the seedheads. Some of these birds will stay around to breed in the hedges and grassy margins. The sort of rough mixture of plants that attract the finches is also good for the skylarks, providing at least three pairs with cover for their nests on the ground and food for their broods from the many insects living amongst the long grasses.

### Pavilion

If you have been down to the park since February you will have seen the Pavilion taking shape just inside the main meadow. But why is it called the Pavilion? The Wick Country Park was originally destined to be a cricket field with some football pitches and a small area for nature conservation. If you look at the style of the building you will see that it resembles a cricket pavilion with a veranda facing the main meadow and the upper half of the walls clad in timber. The original design had these features and that is why it is still called the Pavilion. Since the site was handed over to Countryside Services the plan was modified to develop the whole site with an emphasis on nature conservation, informal recreation and environmental education. Work is progressing well and the building will be ready for the official opening on Saturday 13th September. The Pavilion will have toilet facilities and classrooms for visiting groups and schools to use, which can also be hired for other functions such as environmental birthday parties. There will also be a kitchen area, storage space and an office where a countryside ranger will be based.

### Meadow Trees

In March you may have seen larger trees appearing in the meadow between the woodland mounds and the lake. There are nine trees of different species planted at various locations from the top of a mound to the bank of the lake. The trees have been well spaced to allow them to



grow to their full potential. This, of course, will take many years. The trees will make a visual impact as they grow over future seasons, with some of them eventually reaching 30m high! The trees were chosen because of the interesting shapes and colours of their leaves and bark. They include the Maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) which originates from China and as a species is over 200 million years old; it was around during the age of the dinosaurs. Its leaves are fan shaped and resemble that of the Maidenhair fern (*Adiantum raddianum*) hence the name. There is also a copper beech (*Fagus sylvatica purpurea*), which gets its name from the colour of the leaves. If you look at the meadow trees over the summer, see if you can spot these two, and if you can, find out what the other ones are. You can always ask the ranger if you can't work it out for yourself!

### Vandalism

Unfortunately there has been some criminal damage caused to the site over the past few months. Various pieces of fencing have been damaged and stolen cars have been rammed into the main meadow gates. One car was then dumped into the alder pond and had to be recovered by a tow truck. However, the damage has been repaired and the Council staff and Friends group will not let this mindless vandalism spoil the development of this excellent site. If you have any information about vandalism or other incidents then please call the numbers in this newsletter or contact the police. Any information given will be treated in strict confidence. One vandal has already been identified and dealt with by the police. Please remember

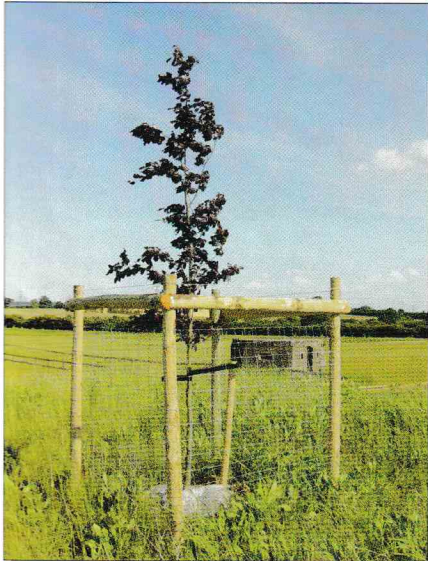
that the Country Park is for the benefit of the local community and wildlife and we all have a stake in ensuring it is used responsibly.

### Pillbox Modification

The three pillboxes on site were built during the early 1940's as part of the country's anti invasion defences. The name Pillbox was first described in the *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (1887) as a "small, round emplacement for housing a machine gun". The name most likely comes from the shape of the pillbox when viewed from above; they look like the containers that used to hold pills!

Our pillboxes are part of a defensive static line that runs northwest from the coast, through the county and up into Cambridgeshire. They were usually constructed of concrete and brick (as ours are) and used to house infantry. We have three types on site. Type 22, 26 and 28a. The type 22 and 26 housed only infantry, the type 28a is the larger one with an opening at the front for an anti tank gun. There is also a wide entrance at the rear to get the gun into place or removed quickly with an additional chamber to one side to hold infantry.

We have decided to put the pillboxes to good use for the wildlife we have in the local area. During the next few months we will be converting the inside of the two infantry pillboxes into homes for bats. The entrances will have grilled doors to allow bats to go in and out, and the loopholes (gun slits) will be blocked off to cut down on light and air movement inside. The internal walls will be modified to allow the bats to hang upside down while they rest. The very thick walls will help to keep the



## Fencing

Two large sections have been erected around the two woodland mounds just west of the Pavilion. The mounds were constructed from the spoil excavated from the lake. But where are the trees? We have planted 'whips', which are trees that are only a couple of years old and stand about one to two feet high. They are not easy to see especially now the other plants have grown up

Castledon School have been involved with the construction of dams in the ditches and the installation of benches and dog poo bins.

The four benches already installed are made of sweet chestnut from Norsey Wood Nature Reserve in Billericay. Tree trunks have been split in half, planed smooth and nailed onto smaller trunks set into the ground. Not only are they a natural



temperature inside fairly constant during the winter, which is what the bats prefer, if they are to colonise the pillboxes and use them to hibernate.

## Trails

There are over 2km of easy access trails installed around the Country Park that will take you around all areas including the east meadow, where you can enjoy views over the whole park. The trails are easy access because the surface is suitable for pushchairs and wheelchairs. There are still a few small sections to complete, and some minor repairs to carry out where we have installed drains, but these will all be done by September. The trails link up with bridges built by the ranger and volunteers across the ditches and the North Benfleet Brook. The vehicle bridge that spans the brook was a little more complex so we left that to the engineers. A boardwalk across the alder pond near the main car park will be constructed soon, opening another crossing point over the brook.

around them. Please do not go into the fenced areas as the trees are easily damaged if trodden on.

Fencing has also been erected around most of the lake, the ponds and ditches. This is to prevent disturbance to the establishing shrubs and wildlife, and also to prevent visitors from falling into the water! Most of the fencing has also been backed with wire mesh. This is to stop small children slipping under the fencing and should stop dogs too. Unfortunately, some of the mesh has been damaged by people who thoughtlessly allow their dogs to enter the water. Not only is this vandalism, it may also be putting children's lives at risk.

## Volunteers and Schools

Various groups and schools have helped to carry out tasks in the Country Park over the past six months. Abacus Primary School, the Scouts, Beavers, Millennium Volunteers and other volunteers have planted over 3000 trees across woodland mounds. The Air Training Corps, Millennium Volunteers and

*Opposite, The Pavilion building nearing completion.*

*Top left, one of the nine specimen trees, a copper beech, and a pillbox can be seen in the distance.*

*Below right, pupils from Castledon School gather round the benches they helped to install.*

product, they are also simple and cheap to manufacture and a sustainable use of local timber. Watch out for more appearing soon around the trail. The dams were put in place to help retain water in stretches of the ditches during dry periods. They have been constructed from sandbags filled with a dry concrete mix and allowed to set in place. The ditches flow into the lake and provide a fantastic linear habitat for aquatic life; by retaining the water in the ditches the aquatic minibeasts will be able to live in the ditches for longer. If you look carefully from the pedestrian bridge you can see some of the minibeasts in the water. Over the summer also look out for dragonflies and damselflies patrolling the ponds, lake and meadow.



Above, a pupil from Castledon School puts in the last nail for the newly installed benches.

Below, the park Ranger and a group of pupils set about planting new trees on one of the woodland mounds.

### The Opening Event for the Pavilion - 13th September 2003

The opening of the park, last December, was a great success and we want to repeat this as we celebrate the completion of the environmental information building, known as the Pavilion. The building work is expected to finish in July which will allow time to smarten up the surrounding area before the big day. Professor Chris Baines, the well known environmentalist broadcaster, author and campaigner will be there to mark the occasion in his entertaining and informative style, along with

a host of local dignitaries and members of the community. This is another landmark in the development of the park and will be suitably 'high profile' so that even more local people will hear about this wonderful new facility. **Don't forget 13th September at 10.00 am!**

#### Information

*Do you have any photographs, maps or plans of the site before work started on the Country Park? We would like to make copies of any that you have for use in displays and to update our historical files. If you have any other information about who owned the land and what it was used for, or interesting stories we would appreciate those too. Any wildlife records that you may have would help us to build up a picture of how the species have changed over the years. If you have any of the above please contact the Ranger at the telephone number given.*

#### Transforming your Space

The Wick Country Park is one of a large number of countryside sites across Basildon district, some operated by the Council, others by the Essex Wildlife Trust or Thurrock Council. There are also formal parks, green spaces within housing areas and lots of public footpaths. If we could link all of this greenspace up, so that people could walk or cycle to their favourite places, the district would be a safer and healthier place and there would be more areas for wildlife to flourish.

#### Contact:

**Ranger - Tel: 01277 624553**  
**Countryside Services Main**  
**Office at Wat Tyler Country**  
**Park - Tel: 01268 550088**

This is the vision that Basildon Council's Countryside Services is aiming for in the long-term. To help that process along it has been working with other Council services to put together a successful bid for Heritage Lottery Fund money to support new and existing projects throughout the district. The HLF money will cover two schemes: 'Gateways to Basildon' and 'Green Gyms'. They will both contribute to improving the environment through community participation, encouraging healthier lifestyles and enhancing the quality of life for local people.

'Gateways' aims to get local people involved in identifying and helping to develop greenspace for amenity and wildlife benefits within their area. It's particularly concentrating on linear sites, for instance; hedgerows, footpaths and wide routes between housing or industry or through existing countryside, and along the banks of rivers or streams in the district.

'Green Gyms' will be getting people out on sites to do some practical work on 'Gateway' areas and elsewhere to improve their fitness and skills. It's aiming at those who don't normally do practical conservation work but might like to benefit from the fresh air and exercise. They could be people who have been ill and need a way to pick up some lost stamina, but each person will be able to work at their own pace. If you are interested to know more about the schemes and have any early ideas to put forward, please contact the Manager of Countryside Services at Wat Tyler Country Park - Tel: 01268 550088. The schemes should get underway by about September or October this year.



Basildon District Council Countryside Services