

# Friends of Coombe Wood



Newsletter 38, Winter  
2016-2017

## From your Chairman

At the AGM we settled on producing two newsletters per year, April and October. (*Editor's note: This is the belated October issue!*) The first of our professionally printed ones was so well received, with the pictures coming out extremely well, that we have decided to continue to have them professionally printed. Some years ago we produced and erected three notice boards at various

## Terry Isherwood

entrances to Coombewood and since we have 50% of the material for a fourth we will complete it and place it by the old graveyard. We are always keen to hear from members regarding any memories they have of Coombewood or to report any wildlife they have seen. Please use the 'Contact Us' page on our web site [www.friendsofcoombewood.org.uk](http://www.friendsofcoombewood.org.uk)

## Memories of Coombe Wood Part Two

## By Trevor Coates

I have said that Thundersley Grove, all those years ago, was still unmade. There were nowhere near as many houses in it as there are now and it was also much narrower than it is today. My attention was drawn one morning to a bit of a commotion outside in the road. I could hear shouting and the sound of a car horn being leant on fairly vigorously. On investigating it was to find that my neighbour's dog, a large, elderly and, (as I knew him to be), very friendly Alsatian lying in one of his favourite places in the middle of the road and a very big, very tough looking man in a lorry leaning out of the lorry shouting at the dog to move and leaning on his horn to add weight to his voice, but not actually daring to leave the safety of his cab. All to no avail. Rex continued lying there unconcerned and it took me, a twelve-year-old kid, to go and pull him up out of the way so that the big, brave lorry driver could continue down the road. I remember getting no thanks from him for doing this!

The story of the squirrel is one of an unlikely friendship that remains one of the fondest memories of my life. Our paths crossed when I saw Fred, (as he was to become), fall out of his dray during one of my walks. I guess I should probably have left him to either find his own way back up the tree, or to be found by his parents, but I'm afraid I did neither. I was completely bowled over by this lovely, tiny, delicate animal that seemed to show no fear as I scooped him up in my hands. He simply sat and let me stroke him and talk to him and then put him inside my shirt and take him home. I have often wondered since if he had only just opened his eyes and I was one of the first things he saw after doing

so because he never showed the slightest sign of fear, or of being anything but entirely content to be with me. He started eating quite happily the moment I got him home and seemed completely at one in his new environment and became, almost immediately, one of the best companions I could imagine having. We became almost inseparable. As long as I was in the house he just wouldn't leave me. He would sit on my shoulder for hours and if he got tired, he was as likely to go to sleep in my pocket as anywhere. He was also full of fun and loved to play, hiding behind cushions and running out to nip me and then running off again. He was also not that particular about what he ate and was as likely to steal someone's sandwich as he was to eat the peanuts and fruit we bought for him. He did eventually go back to the wild. He one day refused to come into the house, but stayed out in the garden. He found himself a hole in a tree at the bottom of the garden and decided to live in that. He would come to me the moment I walked out of the house and was as playful as ever, but would always leave whenever I went back into the house. He then found somewhere else to live. He would still come and play, but those occasions became fewer and eventually he stopped coming. That isn't quite the end of the story though because a good twelve months after he had gone I was walking down Lake Drive into the woods when I saw a squirrel sitting in a tree beside the path. When I stopped, he did not run away but continued to sit there looking at me. Ever hopeful I called to him thinking he may be Fred and he still didn't run away. So I too stayed and continued calling him. Suddenly he came down

the tree and jumped on my shoulder and was then all over me as if he had never been away. That remains one of the best, but also one of the saddest moments of my life. Best because of the fact that even after a year away in the wild, he still remembered me and still wanted to be friends. The saddest, because that was the last time I saw him. He eventually went away back up into his tree to live his life as I guess he was meant to live it, wild and free.

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**An Extract from 'Harrier'**  
**by SSJ Christian**

**Based on a visit to Coombe Wood**

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Dear Harrier,

I am sitting here below the tree whose branches lead up to the heavens. A bending, bouncing bark covered bough ending with sharp ascent attempting to touch the clouds with a last jutting spike. My younger brother beside me is enjoying the thrill the woods bring to the imagination. I saw a swamp where the small folk live and their stick bridges on which they dance across. A woodpecker drums his beak speedily with accuracy greater than man made machine. He stops for an interval then at a random urge strikes again.

The forest floor is an ocean of green as the bluebell leaves sprout up from the year worth of slumber in the underworld. They have long leaves clustered together in a shared centre that is thrown out at different angles. Feeling them is pleasing: cold to touch and waxy; smooth and thin. You know as well as I the beauty they will become.

My ears are sensitive to the sounds about. The singing of birds forming a church's choir of the highest order conducted and collected together to our good friend to whom they sing. The stream before me trickles down over the steps of wood; its gentle flow so musical. Wood pigeons coo and that woodpecker still beats the rhythm of the British jungle. Crows caw from afar and my feet cause a rustle of the leaves.

I took a stroll for a while amid the trees growing on a carpet of leaves. My feet lead me down many paths through mud and under twigs. A glade I found where light shone bright making me feel pleasant. The lane has had a great awakening of blossom. Those white flowers with tiny anthers and a pink centre have paper thin petals that fell raining upon me: woodlands confetti falling as the many ceremonies of matrimony that come with spring form. Its smell is perfect. We have not explored this flower with the sense of smell before. So wondrous is the

Sadly now there are parts of the woods that are not as easily accessible as they were in my childhood, but the place still has a magic of its own. A peace and a tranquillity that continues to allow the birds and the animals, for whom it is their rightful home, a haven amidst the hustle and bustle of human activity, to continue to live their lives as they are meant to lead them, wild and undisturbed.

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Samuel Christian, who has written a short book using the device of two friends in correspondence on issues of the environment, has let us have one of the letters which was inspired by a visit to Coombe Wood.

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fragrance, better than any perfume. My brother tells me it is like vanilla ice cream. The odour to me is soft and sweet, practically impossible to describe. But it is beautiful really beautiful.

We took the river path. You know well how it meanders through the wood. The bed is soft, sprinkled with miniature stones where the water that flows over them erodes vertically to cut down a deep ravine. Slippery sides and crystal clear water along with the drop down cause a bountiful harvest for the creative arts. I could be in an Elven forest chasing monstrous things or discovering a Highlands mountain stream. There on an overhanging edge clung a little yellow flower with a green interior digging deep with its roots to keep itself from the current below. The heart shaped leaf a single organ pointing down to the waters.

We passed under the tree now a dead collapsed arch that was once a king. It was where the wizard first showed us the outcome of a king's cookery class. King Alfred's burnt cakes littered the bark. There are so many more than I have seen before. I also chanced upon a bed of feathers. A wood pigeon most likely it is eaten by a clever creature. No meat remained nor bones, nothing except the feathers completely devoured.

At the deep curved sloping part of the stream I with my brother crossed on the log to the other side and sat on the gradual incline of the hill for our lunch. Here a robin plucked up courage to come near on a perch nearby. It was perfect in shape with pristine feathers like a waxwork was the fellow. Away he flew only to return behind us sitting calmly. The Robin reminded me of the tale the wizard told. The story of the nice old lady who lived by a wood, she befriended a robin or two and fed him cheese. They became such great friends the red breasted bird would fly around the house following her about as he perched by the window begging for food. Some

say the bird she named Nibor would sit on her arm or hand to get food from her. The lady would study them and care so much for them it should be an inspiration to all who love animals.

The lunch stop passed. The first bluebell; a single tower in the green was seen by me. The trees in front of me seemed to be playing a game where they froze each time I looked up at them. They acted like real walking giants.

With the fence now down I took to the new woodland area. Unlike the other parts where there are mostly brown dead leaves there was a carpet of green. It was so abundant with green plants I did not notice any dead leaves. Logs were ships to me and trees rocky pillars amid the green sea. The boats had many little men on them fighting in the ocean from the view I had.

The church yard was the most peaceful place yet, each grave at rest. Many flowers I saw: yellow daf-

fodils, giant crocuses of purple and white like egg cups. Primroses lined the banks in groups huddled together. This place is where the fair maidens of the wood stand; blossoming branches of pink and white. The princess of these arched over the path and gave a flurry of petals when touched. The church yard also presents a badger set at eye level in the hill so I could gaze into the blackness tasting the underworld. This beautiful, tranquil, peaceful place was our final destination on the walk. We passed the church on our way home along the road around to the abode that was ours by the start of our woodland walk.

I hope all is well in London and this gives you an idea of what is occurring in the wood at present.

Your friend,

Jay

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## Forest School in Coombe Wood.

By Gwyn Jordan and Isabel Freed

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At Forest Schools children among other things learn how to do tracking and recognise plants, animals, birds, and insects. It will stimulate their imagination, give them exercise, and open their minds to all the excitement and enchantment of the natural world and the need to protect it.

I was inspired in my early days by playing in Thundersley Glen and was encouraged when my daughter found the aconites in Coombe Wood. Here is a photo of them taken on 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2017. I like to see these early heralds of the new cycle of the seasons in the woods.



Kingston School have been arranging for their children to use Coombe Wood for forest school. One of their young pupils, Isabel Freed, has given her own impressions of these events. The accompanying photograph shows what she looks like after playing in the mud with friends on another occasion, stimulated by the Forest School experience. Here is Isabel's own description of her time in the Wood:

Forest School is an amazing way for children, like myself, to interact and get involved in the great outdoors. It is very fun and enjoyable to be able to play in the mud, make dens and go on rope swings that we have made. All in all, Forest School is the best way to have fun and enjoy Coombe Wood.



- C**reatures are everywhere
- O**pen to everybody
- O**ut and about
- M**ud to play in
- B**eautiful scenery
- E**ndless enjoyment
  
- W**ildlife to watch
- O**urs to enjoy
- O**n our doorsteps
- D**ens to build and hide in

# The Wildlife of Coombe Wood: Birds and Mammals

By John Rostron

Most people walking through the woods will see one or more squirrels, and the occasional bird, although they may well be aware of more birds calling and singing.



Grey Squirrel (Gwyn Jordan)

The American Grey Squirrel is, by far, the most conspicuous mammal to be seen in the wood. They can be seen both on the woodland floor and in the canopy. They feed on the fruits of the trees and shrubs, especially acorns, but will also eat fungi, and much other plant material.

Squirrels are not the only mammals in the wood. You will occasionally see a Fox during daylight, though this is unlikely if you are walking your dog. You are more likely to smell the scent-marks of foxes which they will spray onto trees within their territory.

There are Badgers in Coombe Wood, but these are strictly nocturnal. You are very unlikely to see one unless you sit very quietly in the dark for an hour or two!

We have no records of any other mammals in Coombe Wood, although there are undoubtedly Woodmice and Bank Voles. Woodmice are strictly nocturnal, and the Bank Vole is active both day and night. There is likely to be shrews as well, both the Common Shrew and Pygmy Shrew. The best way to notice shrews is to sit very quietly in one place and listen. A scuffling in the leaf litter, accompanied by high-pitches squeaking will indicate the presence of a shrew. It must be said that these squeaks are above the range of hearing of most people over sixty, so if you would like to go on a shrew hunt, take a teenager with you.

The resident birds of Coombe Wood, which you would probably see or hear on any visit include: Wren, Robin, Blackbird, Great Tit, Blue Tit,

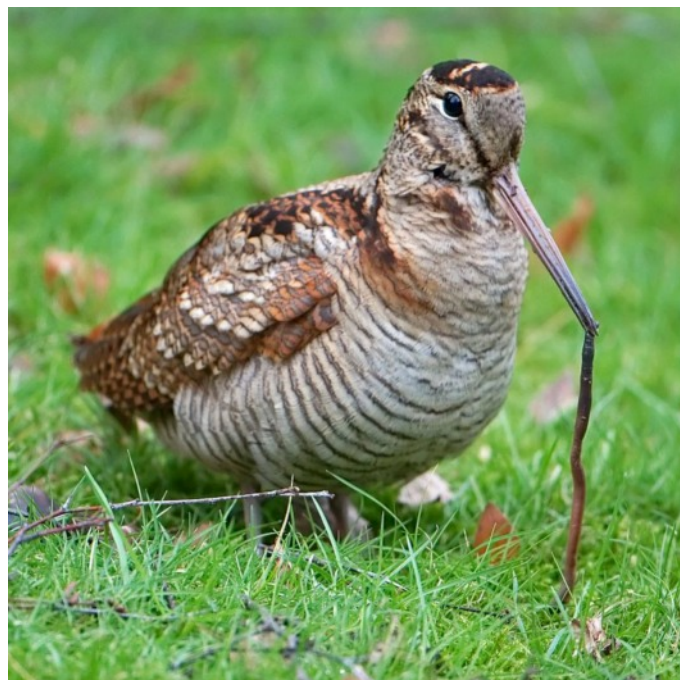
Chaffinch, Wood Pigeon, Jay and Magpie. You could also see or hear the Green and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers.



Blackbird (Andreas Eichler)

In addition there are summer visitors, more typically heard than seen, including Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff. There may be many more than these, but we simply have no records of them. It really needs someone with a familiarity of bird songs to visit in the breeding season.

Winter visitors are even less well recorded, one reason being that winter visitors are seldom heard. The only ones I have seen are Blackcap, Robin and Woodcock. The Blackcaps and Robins that we see in winter are not the same ones that we see in summer. Our winter Robins come from northern Britain, and our winter Blackcaps come from Germany and the Baltic. The Woodcock is resident in Essex, but is unlikely to have bred in Coombe Wood.



Woodcock (Ronald Slabke)