

# Friends of Coombe Wood

Newsletter 50,  
Autumn 2024



Chairman: Gwyn Jordan  
Treasurer: Terry Isherwood  
Secretary: John Rostron

## Keeping Watch in the Wood *by John Rostron*

At a recent Friends of Coombe Wood committee meeting, our Chairman, Gwyn Jordan commented that the boundaries of the wood now appear to be secure.

The only possible future challenges, as he saw it, would be from the properties along Rhoda Road North or from those along Lake Drive. The boundaries along Rhoda Road North are all fenced, but several of those along Lake Drive are unfenced. It might be possible in the future that a landowner could erect a fence along what they saw as their boundary, but which we would consider part of the Village Green.

Gwyn and others do walk the woods regularly at present and are vigilant in noting any possible encroachment.

We have recently produced new posters for our four notice boards around the wood entrances. At the time of writing, three of the four replacement posters have been installed. Thanks to Mandy Cooper and her husband for doing this.

## The Coombe Wood Swamp *by Gwyn Jordan*

Where the combined flow from the streams running through the Wood reach the lowest point before crossing under Rhoda Road North through the culvert, we have perhaps the wettest region of the Wood, excepting the so called “Lake” between Lake Drive and Bread and

Cheese Hill, and one of the most interesting plants – the horsetails (below).



These horsetails pull apart easily as some have said ‘like Lego,’ an attribute of the main stems and the slimmer side shoots. These plants have a long history and their relatives were some of the most dominant plants in the swamps of the dinosaurs about 350 million years ago. At that time there were none of the trees we are familiar with now, though there were some large tree ferns. There were no flowering plants but great swamps where the vegetation gave rise, over many years, to the coal. Fossils can be found in these coal measures similar to the horsetails we see today – and many much larger versions too.

The swampy area is also characterised by the pendulous sedge, *Carex pendula* (below).



This plant is not so ancient as the horsetails and pollen can be seen falling from the hanging flowers. The horsetails however exist in two forms the tall, sterile structures shown in the first picture but also as spore producing cones appearing earlier in the year which intriguingly have no chlorophyll, the normally ubiquitous green pigment in plants, (below left). They are



produced earlier in the year; I have looked in vain to see such spore producing forms this year, To add to the interest of the horsetails, there is the very complex swimming sperm. Horsetails produce their eggs and sperm from very inconspicuous separate male and female plants – like little flat green films on the mud. The spores develop into either male or female versions and fertilisation occurs when the

sperm swim through water films from the male to the female, a process that requires the damp conditions of the swamp.

Although all plants have arisen from earlier ancient plants, it is the fact that the horsetails display characteristics of their earlier ancestors from so long ago, that enables us to consider them in some ways as living fossils.

## All the Leaves are Brown ...

by John Rostron

*All the leaves are brown,*

*And the sky is grey*

The opening lines of *California Dreamin'*, Written by John and Michelle Phillips and sung by The Mamas and the Pappas evoke the feel of Autumn. As I write this in September, the leaves are still largely green, but by the time you read this, many will be brown, yellow, or even red. Such changes in the trees are a distinctive feature of our latitudes, so I thought that an article on this would be appropriate.

But first, why should most of our trees drop their leaves in autumn? Most conifers do retain their leaves throughout the winter, but in Coombe Wood, the only conifer we have is the Yew (and even that does not have cones, though it is evergreen). Conifers mostly thrive in harsher conditions than we see locally, typically at higher latitudes and higher altitudes.

Deciduous trees, that is those that shed their leaves in autumn, are found in latitudes such as ours where the summer is warm and wet, and the winter is colder and wetter. We do get frosts, but we do not typically get extended periods of freezing weather.

Whether or not a tree sheds its leaves in autumn is a trade-off. Harsh weather can kill the leaves of deciduous leaves, but evergreen trees have mechanisms to withstand harsh weather. However, these mechanisms are energy-expensive. In more extreme climates this energy expense is worth it if it allows the leaves to survive the winter and be ready to start growing and making food in the spring.

In our more moderate climates, the cost of keeping leaves alive is not worth the energy saved. A more cost-effective solution is to shed the leaves, but before doing so, the tree will recover as much nourishment from them as it can.

Spring and summer leaves are green, perhaps with shades of red or yellow. This colour is because of the various pigments within the leaf.

creates a layer of cells (known as an abscission zone) which weaken the junction. Once this has formed, any strong wind will blow the leaf off



The most important of these is the green pigment Chlorophyll. This pigment can absorb red and blue light and use the absorbed energy to split Oxygen from water molecules and thence to synthesise the sugars and other chemicals necessary for the life of the tree.

Other, lesser, pigments in a leaf are the yellow Xanthophylls, the orange Carotenes and the red Anthocyanins.

Chlorophyll is the largest and most complex chemically so in the autumn the plant will start to break this down first to recover any nutrients from it. This leaves the other pigments behind, hence the typical brownish colour of an autumn leaf. In some trees, other pigments are broken down so that the remaining pigments give the leaf a red or yellow coloration.

The five leaves in the image above are all of Wild Cherry, *Prunus avium*, which is found scattered throughout Coombe Wood. The left-hand leaf is the brown colour typical of many autumn leaves. The others show various shades of yellow, orange and red

Leaf fall (technically known as dehiscence) is not a passive process, with the dead leaf simply falling off the tree. The tree actively sheds the leaf once the nutrients have been removed from it. At the junction of the leaf and stem, the tree

the tree. These leaves fall to the ground (below, this column) where they form a food resource for a variety of organisms collectively known as Comminutors and Decomposers. Comminutors, which are typically animals such as pillbugs (woodlice) and insects, physically break down the leaf into smaller fragments. The decomposers, which are fungi and bacteria, break down the leaf fragments chemically. This process can take several years, but eventually many of the nutrients in the fallen leaves are released back into the soil where they can be resorbed by the tree and the nutrient cycle goes on.



## Please Help Spread the Word – Take Your Litter Home!

by Eileen Peck

In this heavily congested district where, by the day, traffic seems to increase and life gets more hectic, what joy it is to know that we have an ancient woodland close by. And, what pleasure I take in walking in the quiet of Coombe Wood, marveling at the beauty of the natural world.

But wait, what's here? Every now and then my attention is taken by a beer can, crisp packet or other rubbish which has been casually scattered along the way.

And, that sets me thinking ... Who is prepared to just drop their litter? Why can't they just take it home with them?

And, if the rubbish spoils my enjoyment of the woods, I also start wondering what damage rubbish causes to the wildlife for whom the woods are home.

From Essex Wildlife Trust I learned that:  
*'A hungry animal will search high and low for a snack, yet empty food jars and containers can become a deadly trap for wildlife. Sharp objects like hard plastics, glass and metals scattered in the environment can cause nasty cuts and wounds, which can become infected and cause further harm. If you've ever stepped in chewing gum you'll understand the frustration, but for birds, being unable to take flight due to gum being stuck in their feathers can be a matter of life or death.'*



<https://www.essexwt.org.uk/blog/gemma-cosson/lingering-effects-litter> (QR code above)

The good news is that there are local people prepared to take time to go out to clear up litter so our thanks go to the Castle Point Clean Up Crew who have been litter picking in Coombe Wood for roughly the last five years. When they first started, they were collecting a lot of larger fly-tipped items such as tyres and broken TV sets. During the Covid lockdown, the amount

unfortunately increased including PPE, plastic bottles and cans.

The group report that they have found some strange items over the years such as a doll's head, a door knocker and a kettle as well as lots of 'vintage' litter such as cans and crisp packets dating back to the 1980s and 1990s.

Since their first litter pick at Coombe Wood in July 2020, they have collected 99 sacks of litter but they no longer need to litter pick as often and the amount they collect is half of what it was five years ago – success!

If you'd like to join the friendly group for a litter pick, please contact Emma Powell at [castlepointcleanupcrew@yahoo.com](mailto:castlepointcleanupcrew@yahoo.com) or you can find them on Facebook, X or Instagram.

### Annual General Meeting

This will be held on Tuesday February 18<sup>th</sup> 2025 St George's Small H.

### Subscriptions

Subscriptions for 2025 will be due soon. The minimum payment is £5 annually, but you are welcome to give more. You can pay by post with a cheque (payable to **Friends of Coombe Wood**) to the Treasurer, Terry Isherwood, at 28 Thundersley Grove, SS7 3EB. Or (preferably) you can pay by Bank Transfer. The Sort Code is **20-70-93**; the Account Number is **80215279**; the Account Name is **Friends of Coombe Wood**; for Payment Reference, enter **your name** plus the year **2025**. Please use the Subscribe Page on the website to confirm your payment. Any message there will be forwarded to the Treasurer. The QR code below links to the Subscribe page.

