

FRIENDS OF COOMBE WOOD



Newsletter 51
Spring 2025

Chairman: Gwyn Jordan
Secretary: John Rostron
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Subscriptions and Membership

Subscriptions for the current year are now due. We know that a number of recent members have not renewed because they feel that the Friends of Coombe Wood has fulfilled its function. We do now have the wood protected as a Village Green, and we have acted successfully in getting fences removed which would otherwise have compromised the boundaries of the Village Green. Fortunately, these recent actions on our part did not incur any expenses. However, in one case, we had made contingency plans and were told that if we needed to take the owners to court to enforce the Village Green Boundary, then an initial solicitor's letter would cost us at least £840+VAT, and possibly more.

Other costs are printing the Newsletter, about £42

two or three times a year, and occasional replacement of the notice board posters, about £90 every two or three years.

Given a future situation, we need a contingency fund to be able to deal with it. Although our current funds would have covered this cost, it would not leave any for further disputes.

We would therefore encourage you to renew your subscription and, if possible, make a further donation.



You can find more detail on our Subscribe web page by following the link in the QR code here or by going direct to: <http://www.friendsofcoombewood.org.uk/Subscribe/Subscribe.php>

Budburst in Trees

Oak before Ash, in for a splash
Ash before Oak, in for a soak.

... or does it?

Spring is the time that the buds of trees begin to swell and burst forth into leaf and flower. During the winter these buds have been dormant and, in many trees, inconspicuous. Mostly they have been covered by brown scales, which are really modified leaves.

As the old adage at the beginning of this article suggests, the timing of budburst varies quite a lot between the various species of tree. This is called *Phenology*, from the Greek word meaning 'to show'. There are several external events which will trigger budburst in trees, the two most important of these are daylength (or more strictly nightlength) and temperature. In some trees, rainfall is a triggering factor, but this is not seen in British trees.

In the spring, the nights get shorter and the temperature gradually increases. The decrease in nightlength is much more predictable than temperature. Changes in day or night length depend

on the inclination of the earth to the ecliptic – the plane of the earth's orbit. In summer, the North Pole is inclined towards the sun, and in winter it is inclined away.

Budburst in trees is controlled by a plant hormone called *Phytochrome*. This comes in two flavours. As the nights get shorter, the tree changes the balance of these two flavours. The effect of this is to trigger the spring growth of the tree.

This effect is only really significant in a few British trees, notably Ash and Beech. In most trees, it is temperature that triggers growth and budburst.

Clearly, as the northern hemisphere inclines more towards the sun, the temperature will rise. However, unlike daylength, the increase in temperature is not a gradual increase. It can vary enormously, especially in the middle latitudes where we live. For example it is not uncommon for frosts to occur in late May after a mild spell in April and early May.

A consequence of this is that budburst in daylength-dependent plants such as Ash tends to be at around

the same time each year, whereas budburst in temperature-dependent trees such as Oak will vary from year to year.



Oak buds © Sten Porse

Because of this, the relative timing of these two species can be different depending on whether we have a warm early spring or if the warm weather comes later. So, sometimes Oak bursts before Ash and sometimes Ash bursts before Oak. But is this a predictor of rainfall to come, as the English adage above suggests? I say the English adage because the equivalent German adage predicts the opposite! In fact, there is no scientific evidence that this relative timing can predict future rainfall.

Spring Flowers of the Wood

Spring is the time of year when the wood becomes a Garden and the dark shaded woodland floor



comes alive with flowers. A cycle of endless delight sees a succession of different colours and forms more exciting and beautiful in its way than the well-managed gardens of our homes. The arrangements are all natural and the pattern and 'design' of the woodland garden is more than a

match for the studied arrangements we toil over around our houses. The pattern and arrangement are entirely natural, merely a product of the years and of changes in the woodland itself. The order is a regular annual cycle of blooms and colours and,



There is evidence, however, that past rainfall can have an effect. The buds themselves would have been formed in the previous summer and autumn. If that season was unusually cool or dry, then the buds formed then would be less robust than in a normal season and might burst later.



Ash buds © Philip Halling

Each bud contains, within itself, a miniature version of the shoot that it will eventually become. However, the outermost leaves develop into a series of scale-like sheaths that protect the bud within. Mostly these are brown, but in the Ash, they are very dark brown, almost black. In most trees, these buds are dry, but in a few species, such as the Horse Chestnut, they are sticky with resin which helps preserve them from attack by insects.

by Gwyn Jordan

though not as abundant in types and forms as our gardens, it has its own seasonal rhythm.

Coombe Wood, an ancient woodland in most places, has a few very early blossoms. In the northern area, Winter Aconites (far left) provide nectar to any winter activity of early pollinators.

The small southern plateau, opposite Glen Road, is the site of the little woodland stars of Wood Anemones (left). These have been bursting through the dry leaves and brightening the woodland floor for many years. I recall seeing them when, as a child in the late 1940s, I would gather a few for my mother on a Sunday morning. Maybe such early encounters influenced my later decision to study Botany. Where

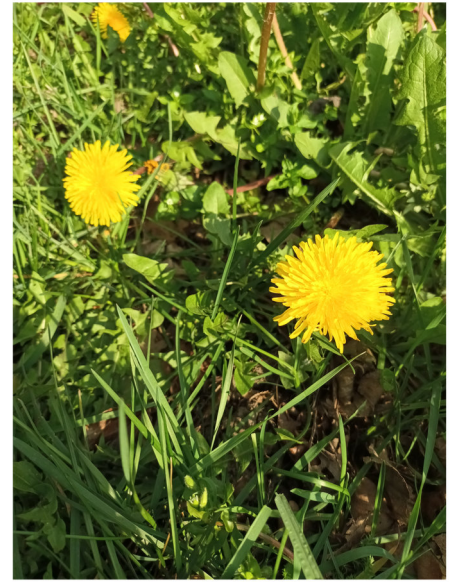


the wood meets the main road, near the site of the anemones, the striking yellow petals of the Lesser Celandine (above, left) burst out, often accompanied by the small blue Speedwell (above middle) and bright yellow Dandelions (above, right), a flower better appreciated by lovers of the Alps than English gardeners. On the sloping land



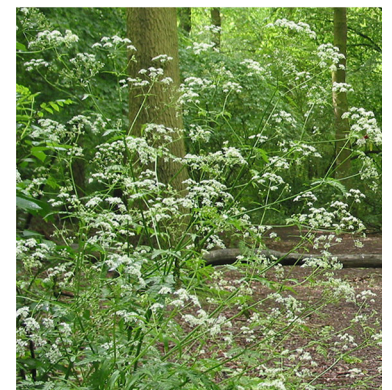
running from the Northern area to the stream there are several types of Violet (below left) among the younger trees of this region.

Above all these little flower displays is the great drama of the Bluebell season (below centre), which seems like a last great celebration of light at the woodland floor. Bluebells particularly fill the central region of the wood. This great display



occurs before the canopy closes in, with the formation of the new leaves of the trees signalling the end of the spectacular 'Woodland Spring Flower Festival'. This finally closes with the white veil of the Cow Parsley (below right) seen mostly in the northern wood.

Long may this annual delight continue.



All photos by Gwyn Jordan

Please – Take Your Litter Home!

A walk in our lovely wood is a blissful relief from busy life in this highly congested area and something I treasure, but there are times when I get distracted from the beauty of nature by litter oh-so-casually thrown away.

Aware that seeing plastic bags and bottles is an annoyance to me, my mind turned to the much greater impact litter has on the wildlife who call Coombe Wood home: the foxes, squirrels, birds and insects.

How are these creatures affected by our human rubbish? To answer the question, I turned to Essex Wildlife Trust who have a lot to say on the subject:

Not-so-tasty treats

To an unknowing animal, litter can easily be disguised as a tasty treat. This is a huge problem for our wildlife which may fill their stomachs with plastics and other rubbish instead of energy-rich foods they need to survive. Plastics and similar culprits may cause choking, airway or stomach obstruction and can ultimately lead to death. But it's not just the larger discarded objects causing a problem, tiny microplastics are just as deadly. These build up in the bodies of our smaller critters, impacting a whole

host of animals as they pass along the food chain. These tiny plastics can wreak havoc on our wildlife's immune function, genetics, lifespan, feeding habits and general health.

Physical harm

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. Becoming hooked or caught in discarded fishing gear is a huge threat to our marine creatures, and similar issues are faced by terrestrial animals. Sadly, entanglement in rubbish can lead to animals becoming stuck and unable to carry out their usual activities like foraging or looking after their young.

A vessel for diseases and harmful chemicals

Litter may harbour disease-causing microbes or toxins that can be harmful when ingested or released into our soils, rivers or



Photo: Angela at Pixabay

seas. The chemicals that leach from microplastics into the environment or animals who ingest them are invisible to us, yet cause problems such as infertility, cardiovascular diseases and cancers. The impact of littering is so profound that it's not just our animals that suffer, it's plants too.

Microplastics have been linked to reduced plant growth and nutrient uptake, causing problems for the whole ecosystem. So, please, think again before you casually throw away an empty crisp packet or a plastic drink bottle, it might be unsightly to you but it could mean pain or death to an unsuspecting creature.

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For more about the work of Essex Wildlife Trust see: <https://shorturl.at/xdTUL>



Photo: John Pauling at Pixabay

Staying Safe in Coombe Wood

Coombe Wood was sold off as plotlands in around 1900, hence there is no one overall owner with whom someone could make a management deal, assuming they would want one and someone is prepared to take it on. You got a strip 20 foot by 150 foot to build your residence on.

We locals have the right to use Coombe Wood for lawful pursuits and pastimes but not to manage it; that right remains with the individual landowners. The current situation is that Coombe Wood must be treated as unmanaged woodland and we must be cognisant of this when we use it.

The two main dangers are unsafe trees and trip hazards on the ground. No one is making dangerous trees safe or clearing away fallen trees to make unimpeded walkways. We must be aware of this when using Coombe Wood. Trees have a natural

by Terry Isherwood

lifespan and die when they fall down – usually in high winds, as do dead branches. So, walking in Coombe Wood in such conditions is particularly hazardous. The usual signs of a dead tree include no leaf growth, persistent brown leaves, peeling bark and canker.

Avoiding trip hazards is just a case of being careful where you put your feet, so stout walking shoes are a must.

Brambles and stinging nettles are another hazard, so a stout stick to push them aside is a useful asset. However, being aware of the surroundings and climbing over dead trees and branches is one of the joys of appreciating what happens to woodland if it is not managed. It is interesting to compare Coombe Wood with a managed woodland like West Wood.