

FRIENDS OF BECKENHAM PLACE PARK

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Events

Please see our website for forthcoming events.

A HISTORY WALK was led by Mal on 21 August with about twenty participants. Mal explained the many changes to the park, mansion and inhabitants and the surrounding area over around five hundred years. We had a look at the ancient pond (recently refurbished via the Friends and grants) which is again covered by duckweed. Then we walked across the former golf course looking at the trees, some of which would have witnessed many events over the centuries. Many trees already have brown and falling leaves due to the hot dry weather. How amazing they are to drop their leaves, thus conserving water. Trees use a process named transpiration to lose moisture from their leaves which would be very threatening when not taking sufficient water in by their roots. There was also music coming from loudspeakers on the mansion which carried over the whole area. Why do park visitors need such noise when surely they should be experiencing the wonder of natural sounds and silence in a park environment. There is surely enough noise around everywhere these days. We reached the Foxgrove, which used to be the golfers pavilion and the 'music' seemed even louder over here! Mal pointed out some cast iron boundary markers between Lewisham and Bromley. There are quite a few around the park if you look carefully (See photo later on). The walk continued, passing the top of Crab Hill where a prisoner of war camp used to be situated. Thanks to Mal for giving up his Sunday afternoon.

FUNGUS FORAY

This will take place on Sunday 23 October at 2pm from the mansion and will be led by Dr Mark Spencer. Let's hope there are some fungi after this strange summer weather.

PARK NEWS

For readers who have not visited the park recently, you may be interested to know that eventually the ugly third security barrier around the lake has been

dismantled. There are still two barriers remaining with the space between successfully being filled with growing hawthorn and other plant species, thus hopefully becoming impregnable to invasive humans. The lake has been busy with human swimmers, paddle boards and canoes and successful families raised by mallards, coots, moorhens, Egyptian geese and little grebes.

New Water Bird ID Board. The ID board (picture below) is now being made and should be in place by late autumn.



Water Water...

The current dry spell and drought conditions may have been building up for a few years and the effects on Beckenham Place have been evident for some time. Last year the long grass meadow on Crab Hill was cut early due to dry conditions and fire risk.

We see evidence of less than sensible use of barbecues as someone lit one on the wooden picnic table in the sensory garden! And the Fire Brigade have requested that disposable bbq's are not used in parks and open space.

However swings in weather conditions are nothing new although the climate change conditions may be making matters worse.

John Evelyn's diaries written circa 1650-1700 tell of years of wet and dry or hot and cold conditions which led to crop failures and shortages.

The water features in Beckenham Place are victims to some of these changes. There is no evidence of a lake prior to John Cator's creation of a park from 1760 onwards and the lake was constructed to follow the landscaping fashion of the times and utilise the stream which used to flow along the valley below the mansion probably around 1780. That stream originally would have joined the Ravensbourne somewhere before the river reached Southend hamlet. The original lake may have been re-landscaped and reshaped by John Barwell Cator after 1806 which we conclude from map evidence. The later construction of the railway appears to have cut off the original outlet from the lake and a drain was put underground across the field we call The Common to drain into the Ravensbourne. The stream which fed the lake rose in the region of Foxgrove Farm which was near the junctions of Foxgrove Road, Westgate Road and The Avenue. It is said that the construction of the West Kent Sewer cut off or diverted much of the water which made the stream more seasonal and although we recall some flow along the stream it has become increasingly dry in recent years and more recently the ditch has been filled in and the only evidence of the stream is a couple of depressions and some greener ground along the bottom of the valley. A couple of seasonal ponds called swales have been dug along the valley bottom. The original lake dried up by degrees and was colonized by trees such as willow and alder, the drier parts also having ash and oak encroaching. After the park was acquired for public use in 1927/29 the lake was halved with the remaining half becoming seasonal and described as willow carr i.e. mostly trees in a wet habitat. Occasional storms would fill the ditch and willow carr but dry out in most summers.

The other water feature in the park, the ancient pond next to Stumps Hill Wood is of unknown age but is shown on a map of 1785 and was associated with a farm which stood at the foot of Stumps Hill toward Beckenham which predates Cator's house and park. The pond apparently makes use of a spring and the water remains relatively constant. Perhaps the pond was dug to create a watering place for livestock or maybe clay was dug out for making bricks. Both options are feasible. Maps show that other springs and ponds were around the summit of Stumps Hill. In recent years the Friends of BPP attracted funding for restoring the pond.

The Ravensbourne river runs along the east side of the park and although there are old references to fish such as trout being caught in it there is little current

evidence of fish these days but Kingfishers catch something there even if only minnows or sticklebacks. We do see some fish of a few inches in length in the Pool river where it runs between Cator Park and Kangley Bridge Road. Both the Ravensbourne and Pool rivers (which join near Catford) are used to extract water by Thames Water and this reduces the flow of both rivers. Ironically a few years ago a flood alleviation scheme was designed for the east side of Beckenham Place Park but maybe that has been shelved however there are plans to make alterations to the east side of the park which have both supporters and detractors. I guess we should really be making provision for both the storage of water when rain does arrive and such storage would also perform a degree of flood prevention or control if designed for that purpose. Bearing in mind that water is more of a necessity for life than oil it's a wonder that we don't have a worldwide pipeline system but national boundaries and politics prevent that...unfortunately. And water doesn't command such a high price (yet).



1833 Cator Estate map (north is toward the right hand edge)

There is some evidence of dried up springs in other parts of the park i.e. near Crab Hill which had ditches cut to divert water toward the original lake. One such ditch is cut under the railway and occasionally drains water onto Summerhouse Field next to the Ravensbourne.

Some people may recall moderate flooding of the field.

Maps show that other springs and ponds were around the summit of Stumpshill toward the Sydenham side of the hill. One such spring and resultant stream became the Lewisham/Beckenham boundary but it in turn is now mainly a dried up ditch between housing, school and allotments unless storms drain into it.

The ancient pond was recently dredged and restored with funding acquired by the Friends of Beckenham Place from grants resulting from landfill tax. Perhaps strangely here we should mention that the old lake in BPP appears to have been partly filled in with wartime bomb rubble as during reconstruction of a lake some hazardous material was uncovered and had to be safely buried in other parts of the park.

The same is said of The Common which was filled in with rubble and covered over to make playing fields. This had originally been water meadow/flood plain for the Ravensbourne.

(With thanks to Mal).

Sensory garden

The Sensory garden is maintained by the Friends and receives much praise. Do look by if you are walking in the park.

With thanks to our hardworking volunteers (volunteers are always welcome).

Fatal stabbing

A young man was stabbed while he was sitting in his car in BPP car park at 4.30 a.m. on 16th July (when the park is supposedly closed). He managed to drive to a hospital but subsequently died of his injuries. Two men and two women have so far been arrested.



A photograph of two of the many boundary markers in the park.

A few more definitions from the Uxbridge dictionary.

Crucifix	religious adhesive
Hollyhock	the art of pawning Christmas decorations
Hippocampus	a very large, gay cat
Godspeed	it's raining
Nomad	the study of gnomes

LUCY WALKER-MITCHELL, LEAD RANGER

Lucy has been working in the park for five years and her sunny and helpful disposition is much appreciated. A large community of volunteer gardeners and helpers at events has grown under her care. She married last year and the couple have decided to relocate and foster or adopt.

They will make great parents.

It is going to be extremely sad to see Lucy go and she will be such a loss to the park and us all, but we wish them good fortune in their years ahead.

Woodpeckers

As you will know the Friends 'logo' is a woodpecker and for many years scientists have puzzled over how woodpeckers can escape concussion. That puzzle may now be solved.

The bird can endure 20 impacts a second when it is pecking.

Were humans to mimic the actions of a woodpecker, the result would be fractured skulls, broken noses and concussion.

It has been thought that its skull must have some kind of shock-absorbing mechanism to prevent brain damage as it crashes its beak into a tree up to 20 times a second.

Scientists have now found, however, that its cranium provides no such help, acting instead like a "stiff hammer" to maximise the force applied as it searches for food, creates a nest or "drums" to communicate.

The sudden deceleration would create enough pressure to cause concussion in a human brain, but a woodpecker's brain experiences only between 39 and 60 per cent as much pressure, not enough to cause damage, according to a study published in the journal.

This is thanks to the size and shape of its skull, which can resist the force of each blow without needing to absorb it. The woodpeckers would have to

peck twice as hard, or the surface be four times as hard, to suffer concussion. "The forceful impact of the beak and the associated abrupt deceleration of woodpeckers' heads when hammering into trees ... has long intrigued scientists who wonder how these birds protect their brain against injury," the study said. "When a moving head strikes a stationary object, the sudden deceleration of the head will cause compressions at the impact site of the brain and expansions at the back side, which can both damage neurons and cause dysfunction."

Ornithologists previously thought that the "spongy bone in a woodpecker's skull", which is "particularly well developed at the frontal region" must be a "prime candidate for shock absorption".

This puzzled scientists, however. If the woodpecker's skull absorbed some of the force, it would reduce the force applied to the tree. Evolution is unlikely to have produced a mechanism that reduces the efficiency of the feeding process, the study notes, explaining: "If the beak absorbed much of its own impact the unfortunate bird would have to pound even harder." Researchers from Belgium, Canada and Germany took high-speed video of six woodpeckers to analyse their hammering frame by frame and assess whether there was any movement in the areas around the beak and eyes that would indicate shock absorption.

These areas "behaved stiffly in all individuals studied", showing that "their cranial skeleton is used as a stiff hammer to enhance pecking performance, and not as a shock-absorbing system to protect the brain".

They also used models to examine the pressure experienced by the woodpeckers' brains.

"The absence of shock absorption does not mean their brains are in danger during the seemingly violent impacts," Sam van Wassenbergh, of the University of Antwerp, said. "Even the strongest shocks from the over 100 pecks that were analysed should still be safe for the woodpeckers' brains as our calculations showed brain loadings that are lower than that of humans suffering a concussion. "While filming the woodpeckers in zoos, I have witnessed parents explaining to their kids that woodpeckers don't get headaches because they have shock-absorbers built into their head. This myth of shock absorption in woodpeckers is now busted by our findings."

Banging your head against a brick wall is the very metaphor of frustration. To do it repeatedly at a speed of 16 miles per hour would be a guarantee of brain injury. Yet an equivalent force is generated by a woodpecker every time it hammers a tree, which it does up to 20 times a second when foraging for food. How does this small and delicate creature avoid ill-effects or even discomfort? Scientists have finally figured it out.

It was long thought that a woodpecker's skull provides natural shock absorbers, in the form of extra cartilage. Yet a study published in the journal Current Biology provides a revolutionary answer.

The researchers concluded from high-speed video footage that a woodpecker's cranium acts like a "stiff hammer", allowing it to deliver the maximum force with each of its blows. The size and shape of its skull provides resistance to the force rather than needing to accommodate it. Whereas humans would suffer 7 severe concussion by slamming their head into a tree, a woodpecker's brain experiences only between 39 and 60 per cent of the same pressure.

The research demonstrates the qualities of woodpeckers, whose ability to detect insects under tree bark combines extreme sensitivity to the movement of prey with a ruthlessly efficient ability to then extract it. But it also illustrates the sophistication of the mechanism underlying evolution. A common stereotype of the evolution of species is that it involves continual progressive advances towards "higher" forms. This is not true.

Charles Darwin commented that evolution by natural selection and random mutation never produces "perfection", but merely provides adaptation to existing conditions. Woodpeckers gain sustenance because of their skulls, beaks and long tongues. Nature has no plan and no ideal type, which is one reason it is always wondrous.

(With thanks to 'Current Biology').

If you have any interesting stories about the Park please send them in.

Our email address is bpp.friends@hotmail.co.uk

Our address for correspondence, relating to newsletters, is :

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Websites of Interest

Friends of Beckenham Place Park

www.beckenhamplacepark.org.uk

Lewisham Local History Society

www.lewishamhistory.org.uk

Bromley Local History

www.bblhs.org.uk

Ravensbourne Valley Preservation Soc.

www.rvpsbromley.org.uk

Deptford Creek

www.creeksidecentre.org.uk

Kent Archeology

www.kentarcheology.org.uk