

Summertown Bridge Club Newsletter June 29 2020

It's curious how our feelings change over the course of (for me) just over 100 days of lockdown. Checking my diary for events I was looking forward to but was denied, I've counted up 11 concerts (in two of which I was due to sing with Oxford Harmonic Choir), 11 talks at Oxford Literary Festival, 8 planned visits or gatherings of family or friends,, at my home or elsewhere, as well as the Euros (football), Wimbledon, the Olympics, the Tour de France, all to be assiduously followed on TV. About 14 weekly Bridge games and choir rehearsals. So at first I raged. Now, I look back on a magical spring and it feels like my village childhood. I know I'm fortunate to live with someone whose company I enjoy, and to live on the edge of open fields.

We've discovered many wonderful walks, two of which I'm going to share with you, about 60-90 minutes each with stops to stand and stare. We live next to the meadows at Marston, the wild side of the Cherwell, which include an SSSI and the local equivalent. We often used to do a half hour round walk into the University parks, and had occasionally walked upstream on our (eastern) side of the Cherwell, but hadn't explored all the options: lots more than I can describe here. As you all know the Maison Francaise I'm giving the walks as if it were starting from there.

Walk 1: Continue along Norham Road then take the lane to the left that goes between Dragon School and the back of Park Town. Turn right where you meet Bardwell Road and follow the road round until you get to Wolfson College. This college hospitably keeps its gates open, with a nicely defined walk through the gardens to the bridge across the Cherwell, which is also kept unlocked. Before you get to the bridge, just take a peep round the end of the building (it's marked Private but you're only going a few steps) to admire the semi-enclosed 'quad' with attractively landscaped grounds and lake, and a rare example of Brutalist architecture that doesn't actually look brutal (Powell and Moya, early 70s).

Cross the bridge and turn right next to the Cherwell. You're now in North Mead, part of the SSSI. Apparently there's a difference between a mead and a meadow, the former being too flood-prone for grazing for most of the year. The management of agriculture on these fields has hardly changed for hundreds of years. Hay is taken in July, after seeds have matured and dropped, followed by 'aftermath grazing' which controls invasive plants. The variety of (mostly unassuming) plants and grasses here is amazing. There are flowers of course: yellow flag or iris, dogrose, buttercups, oxeye daisies, cow parsley, king-cups, meadowsweet, as well as hedgerow plants such as goosegrass and garlic mustard, aka jack-by-the hedge. But what has astonished us is the variety of grasses: we counted about a dozen (see picture at the end), some as tall as us. It's difficult to identify them all but the names we found speak delightfully of old England: foxtail, cocksfoot, crested dogstail, Yorkshire fog, rye grass, false oat grass.

It was the foxtail that revived a memory from my first year at the village school, aged 5, pulling out the stalks and sucking them, surrounded by young bracken you could hide in on the common that adjoined the playground. I was absorbed in my fantasy play so missed the bell that

recalled us to the classroom. When I sidled in late, Teacher asked where I'd been. I whispered that I'd been playing fairies by myself. Oh, she said loudly to the class (this was a class of ages 5 to 10 in the small village school), Jane's been playing fairies by herself. Humiliation.

The walk continues along the riverside path through South Mead then five or six other small fields, most still in the SSSI. You may well see deer on these fields. You reach a T junction to a well-used path with a right turn onto a rainbow bridge into the University Parks. In the park, turn right to look at the ducklings in the pond, then continue to a gate near Lady Margaret Hall: the lane takes you to Norham Gardens and you get back to Norham Road via Fyfield Road.

Walk 2: The start of this walk follows in reverse the last section of Walk 1. Go down Fyfield Road, past the gates of LMH and down the lane into the University Parks. Turn towards the river and follow it downstream through the park. Go through the kissing gate on to the Marston cycleway (be alert for speeding cyclists!) Go a few yards to your left across a side stream then right before you get to the river, on a path beside the right bank. This isn't an SSSI but the field opposite is. Here the fields have lovely names: Music Meadow then Great Meadow then Long Meadow. They are charmingly unkempt and you meet few people. If you continue, you end up opposite the grounds of Magdalen which are kept locked. (If you walk on the left bank of the Cherwell instead of the right, that's the Mesopotamia walk and you get to the locked gate.) Before then you can admire one of the best examples of modern architecture in England: Arne Jacobsen's St Catherine's College, 1960. You can return the same way or walk through the grounds of St Catts and return along Manor Road and St Cross Road then through the park, though the corner opposite Linacre is noisy and dusty with demolition work at present.

As lockdown eased we've ventured further: Shotover had wonderful bluebells and a loud cuckoo; Sydlings Copse on the edge of Otmoor had more gorgeous bluebells, cowslips, great biodiversity for a small nature reserve. Slightly further afield, Duxford and Chimney meadows, normally the most tranquil and remote stretch of the whole Thames, were busy with families and walkers, and a riverbank near Shifford Lock was like Blackpool beach – but lovely nonetheless. We heard two more cuckoos and saw possible signs of otters. All through April and May the new leaves on the trees were enchanting. Now in late June has the magic passed? We're already past the longest day. The cuckoos have stopped. Will we look back with nostalgia to a perfect spring?

I've played a little Q-plus Bridge on line, but I'm missing choir more than live bridge! It's been great this month to see family again. I'm hoping to meet up with you all at Maison Francaise before too long. Till then, stay safe.

Jane Darke



Grasses from North Mead, spring 2020

Photo: Roy Darke