

# FRIENDS OF FOOTS CRAY MEADOWS



ISSUE 6

NEWSLETTER

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## Take the sting out of spring

**S**tinging Nettle *Urtica dioica* found in abundance in Foots Cray Meadows. As the winter months fade away and we are touched by the colour and greenery of spring, keep an eye open for new nettle growth. Stinging nettles are often judged as a nasty stinging weed, often learned in early childhood. Think twice; stinging nettles *Urtica dioica* are a valuable source of iron and vitamins and when we crave greens after the long winter months head for the nettle patch. Nettles once cooked have a taste similar to Spinach and are a rich source of vitamin A, C, D, iron, potassium, magnesium, calcium and are high in chlorophyll. The nettle tribe Urticaceae is spread all over the world containing 500 species mainly tropical, some of the cousins of our native plant are much more venomous and can lead to illness resembling lock jaw or even death if stung.

The native to the British Isles 'Urtica' derived from the Latin 'uro' to burn; are well known for their burning properties. Nettles are perennials that grow up to 2 metres tall in the summer months then dying back to the ground in winter. They have yellow widely spreading roots, and stolons (runners). Leaves are green and soft 3 to 15cm long, opposite on wiry stems. The leaves have strong serrated margins that taper to a point. The leaves and stems are covered with hairs. The flowers are green in long branched clusters from the axils of the leaves. The Latin name of the plant *dioica* means 'two houses' - this refers to the fact that the male and female flowers are normally carried on separate plants, and are pollinated by the wind. The plant flowers between June and September.



Two other types of nettle can be found in England that is *Urtica urens* which is a lesser nettle and can be found in places to *U. dioica*, but has smaller leaves and the flowers are short and mostly unbranched clusters with male and female from the same panicle. It rarely grows more than a foot tall, is a common garden weed growing annually. It too is a medicinal plant. And: *Urtica pilulifera* or the Roman Nettle, bearing female flowers in little compact, globular heads. Thought to have been introduced by the Romans, *U. Pilulifera* is not as common and found mainly in the eastern parts of England on waste ground close to the sea. Nettles have been used medicinally and as a food since the beginning of time and areas of abundance indicate there was once human habitation. This could be responsible for high levels of phosphate and nitrogen in the soil which is ideal growing conditions for the nettle. In fact; nettles were used commonly up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as food, medicine and to make clothing. It seems like nettle has been forgotten to most of us as we rely heavily on the supermarket to provide our green food and the doctor for our medicine.

### Harvesting

Nettles are abundant and it actually does them good to pinch the tops. Nettles need to be harvested before they flower when they are young and vibrant green. Adorn your Gloves and count down to 2 or 3 bracts from the top and cut the stem there. It will not damage the plant and will re grow, this also allows for a longer harvesting period. Place in your collection bag and when you have enough wash in water using a stick so you don't get stung. As soon as they are cooked the sting has been removed. As the plant gets older it becomes fibrous and gritty, and develops Cystoliths that can irritate the kidneys, so only harvest young tender plants. If you have plenty you can dry the tops for later use, nettle tea is a wonderful refreshing drink and full of nutrition.

Be sure not to damage the roots of this wonderful weed as it supports so much wild life.

Suzie Noble

Views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Committee or Bexley Council (unless otherwise stated).

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# Building on a successful winter

February gave the Meadows a proper blanket of snow for a few days, coupled with a cold snap late last year; this was almost a traditional winter; hopefully to be followed with spectacular spring conditions. The Friends were out and about during the winter, with a really successful tree planting day in January and a very interesting group walk.

A disappointment is the delay in getting in our subscriptions; this of course will not apply to those of you who are sent a copy of the newsletter upon publication. However, if you have forgotten to subscribe then please do so. A vibrant membership is a measure of the success of the group.

As members you have a vote at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) which is on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June at 7pm in the Wildlife & Information Centre (W&IC). The formal business of an AGM will set the Group up to deliver another successful year for the Meadows and our Members. I feel the Committee should be very proud of our endeavours and your participation at the AGM will reflect this. Following the formal business we trust you will join us for an informal chat and a glass of wine. The secretary will be sending member's the official notice of the AGM in due course.

I am pleased with the development over the last year especially with the introduction of work days and you will see from our forthcoming events that we will again be working with then London Borough of Bexley to bring opportunities for communities especially families to undertake some practical work in support of the management and conservation of the Meadows.

Whilst we are increasingly using the W&IC as a base there is still some ongoing work to make it fit for the purpose of providing an instant source of information to visitors about the Meadows and the wildlife that frequents the area during the year. That said; we are extremely delighted to be the recipients of a grant of £2575 from Awards for All. This is for additional equipment to further enhance the presentation facilities within the centre. This award is a significant step towards the centre becoming a fully operational facility for Foots Cray Meadows and the Friends.

The committee look forward to seeing you at the AGM and you and your friends joining us in increasing numbers at our events and work sessions, throughout the summer and autumn.

Michael Heath (FFCM Chairman)

## Bird Boxes Bird Boxes One Year On! One Year On!

The FFCM organised a Bird Nest Box Day in February 2008 where people were asked to either sponsor or donate money for nesting boxes to be placed around the meadows. Several people were kind enough to participate and we raised £129. No mean feat but we were lucky enough to find a contact at Ruxley Manor Gardening Centre who brought the relevant sponsored bird boxes for us at a discounted price. This meant that we were able, at a later date, to take advantage of a Bogof (buy one get one free) offer that enable us to acquire a further 10 bird boxes, a total of 23 boxes.

Shortly after buying the first batch of boxes Sid Wilkinson, John Codling and Mark Taylor (London Borough of Bexley employees) and myself met and whilst they placed the bird boxes I noted their location and took a few photo's as we went around the meadows.

When I brought the second batch of boxes we had to wait sometime before Sid was able to arrange to have them placed, due to health and safety height limits. Then one Saturday afternoon Sid showed me where he had been able to put them. Now, March 2009, all boxes are up and their locations plotted on my map. Now we hope that the birds will find and use them giving them the means to 'go forth and multiply'.

I would like to thank everyone that sponsored the bird nest boxes. We have definitely put our mark on Foots Cray Meadows! Perhaps we could do this again – maybe next year?

Margaret Dodd – FFCM Events Manager.



LOTTERY FUNDED AWARDS FOR ALL



Tree Planting Work Day

# Editorial

Reading Suzie's article and recipe for nettle soup took me back to a weekend scout camp in the early 60s, where as a 16 year old Senior Scout I was introduced to surviving in the "Wilderness".

My then Senior Scout Master had just re-discovered a book written by Baden Powell on how to survive in the wilderness and thought this would make a really interesting camp for us. So on an early Saturday morning we arrived at a place called Friday Street and were off loaded from the back of an old Army 3 ton lorry (*Health & Safety rules hadn't been invented then*) to view our camping area for the weekend a forest with a few glades. Then out of his pocket our Senior Scout Master produced this book and proceeded to inform us that all around us was food to eat including rabbits. We then had removed from us our little pup tents and were informed we would have to build ourselves shelters in which to sleep. As if this wasn't bad enough our food rations were then issued 2 potatoes each! The number of blank faces was in hindsight quite a funny thing to see.

Did I survive the weekend yes but catching (if you could) skinning and then cooking rabbits meant for me, that I can't abide to see them on a plate. The other abiding memory is making nettle soup and tea, unfortunately we didn't have the benefit of Suzie's recipe.

Nick Grant



## Committee Members

- **Chairman - Michael Heath**
- **Secretary - Karen Wheeler**
- **Vice Secretary - Margaret Dodd**
- **Events Manager " "**
- **Treasurer - Gill Burgess**
- **Membership Secretary - John Burgess**
- **Website Manager - Paul Trethewey**
- **Newsletter Editor - Nick Grant**
- **Committee Members - Lesley Grant, Vera Heath, Shirley McKeon**

We need a **Publicity Manager** and **Conservation Manager**. Please contact us if interested.

[www.ffcm.org.uk](http://www.ffcm.org.uk)

email : [ffcm06@gmail.com](mailto:ffcm06@gmail.com)



## Nettles as Food

Because of the high vitamin content, nettles provide a great free food. They are known as a "super-food" as they provide

the highest plant source of iron. Any dish that you would use spinach or Kale can be replaced with nettles. Here is my recipe for Nettle soup, be sure to read the harvesting rules (main article) before picking nettles.

### Suzie's Warming, Nutritional Nettle Soup

- 2 good handful's of Nettle tops
- Knob of butter
- 1 Floury potato
- Onion or Leek
- Clove of Garlic (optional)
- Salt, pepper to taste
- Water or stock

Melt the butter and gently fry the onion or leek, garlic and potato until slightly soft. Add the washed nettle tops and top up with water or stock till just covering the ingredients. Simmer for 20 minutes, season to taste. Then pop the lot into the whizzer and serve with crusty bread.

Suzie Noble

## Aims and Objectives

- Working in partnership with Bexley Council to encourage public interest in, and the conservation of Footh Cray Meadows (FCM).
- To protect the wildlife and its habitat within FCM.
- To provide a focus for involvement by the community and users in the open space, to volunteer and work with the Council, in the conservation of FCM and its development as a public open space.
- To advance the public's awareness of the open space by promoting FCM its plants, wildlife, landscape, sustainability and supporting appropriate recreational facilities for the benefit of community groups and the general public.
- To develop and deliver information, interpretive material and educational opportunities for FCM
- To raise funds for the purpose of achieving the above aims.

# Meadows Management Update



*As the owner of the Meadows Bexley Council are responsible for the management of the site. We thank them for the following update.*

*Editor*



## Thames 21

River keepers from Thames 21 have been working with students from Hadlow College to undertake a fish survey, we are awaiting details of the findings but initial reports seem to suggest that there are too many predators. This work will go together with the recently received survey of the lake, the study has looked at the condition of the lake and made predictions as well as costed proposals for its partial or full restoration. Once this work has been considered the Council will present the findings to the Friends group and then seek to agree a way forward to ensure that the lake and the value that both people and wildlife get from it is retained and enhanced.

**Word of caution to dog owners**, please do note that dogs are not allowed in the lake and much of the river up stream from the lake, there are signs. This is a local nature reserve. Not only do dogs disturb wildlife - at this time of year this impacts on breeding birds- but the dogs themselves are in danger from the very strong, and aggressively protective male swan. There have been incidents in the past and do not wish to see these repeated and the best way to keep dogs out of the water to protect them and local wildlife. Thank you



**North West Kent Countryside Partnership** have recently been on site. They have coppiced hazel trees to provide material for bank revetment work on the north side of the river, downstream of Five Arches, where the bank was being eroded to the point where the footpath nearly disappeared and was almost impassable. Work has been carried out with agreement of the Environment Agency, who need to be consulted on work adjacent to or within the River. There are plans to carry out more bank revetment work on the lake during summer.

**Froglife** – the British Charity - dedicated to the preservation and awareness raise of frogs toads and amphibians- has been granted funds from the National Lottery to work in the London Borough of Bexley. They have already visited the Meadows and confirmed that it is here that they would like to invest their funds for the Borough.

Work is currently underway to see what opportunities there are for improving and creating new habitats for amphibians in and around the Meadows and with significant existing suitable habitats the potential to improve the site is considerable. We will let you know of developments and proposals when we have them.

Over the winter our annual woodland work was undertaken, the highlights are listed below:

A few compartments of Hazel coppice were one in North Cray woods as part of our coppice restoration plan for the wood; A new woodland glade has been opened up to improve habitat for insects - especially butterflies and birds; Invasive sycamores have been felled at the back of the site of Footh Cray Place; 24 standard sized trees -mostly English oaks but some Lime and Ash - have been planted across the meadows; and Re-cutting the re-growth of previously felled sycamore in North Cray Woods will take place shortly.

## The old shrub beds come back to life!

After the felling of invasive sycamores in the Old Shrubbery this winter - just to the side of the site Footh Cray Place- it has now been planted up with dog wood (Corylus) red and yellow. This may not return the shrub bed to its former past but it adds some natural colour that will hint back at its past glory.

The felling and thinning of the trees that have self seeded in the shrub bed has also encouraged a carpet of spring bulbs to burst into flower- some will be remnants of the former planting from over 60 years ago. If you look closely you may see a few other signs of the shrub bed's former past- a few surviving former shrubs and trees that have been hidden away until now. Look out for a small surviving Japanese Acer tree that will provide stunning colour in autumn.

**Parks Team,**  
[parks&openspaces@bexley.gov.uk](mailto:parks&openspaces@bexley.gov.uk)

# Dates for your Diary: Future Events

We hope you are interested in joining in the many events we will be hosting in the coming months. At all the events listed there will be Committee Members attending. Dates (where known) and a brief description are below; look out for publicity in the weeks leading up to each date. For further information please contact the Secretary on 07874 217186

● **Tuesday 14th April**  
**Egg Hunt**

Meeting outside the W&IC 11.30 children and their parents are invited to join in a 'bring and share' picnic and various children's games. There will be the chance for the children to decorate their eggs. The event is aimed at the under fives but big brothers and sisters are welcome to join the fun. Details from 020-8309-0367

● **Saturday 18th April**  
**S & D Natural History Society walk**

● **Sunday 3rd May**  
**Spring Walk**

Meeting at the W&IC at 2.30pm.  
Come and enjoy the Bluebells with us.

● **Thursday 21st May**  
**Local history talk**

by Katherine Harding & Denise Baldwin  
William Smith Memorial Hall at 7.30pm. Entrance fee - £1 for FFCM members or £2 for non members

● **Tuesday 9th June**  
**AGM**

Details of the venue and time will be notified to members nearer the date

● **Saturday 18th July**  
**Summer work day**  
Meet at W&IC at 10.00am

● **4th/5th July**  
**Danson Park Festival**  
Friends of Footh Cray Meadows will be having a stand in the Environment Zone Marquee.

● **September**  
**Bat walk**  
**Details to be advised**

## Join Today Membership costs just £4 per household annually

The Friends of Footh Cray Meadows is a voluntary group funded by its membership & fund raising activities.

### Membership will grant you

- Seasonal Newsletters that will include updates on projects.
- Reduced admission on any talks or events that we are not able to host for free.
- Additional Meadows related contacts, whether you would like help with
- Getting an event off the ground or simply would like to share some ideas or concerns regarding Footh Cray Meadows.
- Early notification of meetings, events and talks.

### Money raised will help to:

- Fund projects that will both protect and benefit The Meadows.
- Encourage interest & enthusiasm in the area.
- Organise outdoor events & talks.
- Improve facilities (initially the Wildlife and Information Centre).

*Any names and contact information gathered by The Friends of Footh Cray Meadows will only be used by themselves or Bexley Council on their behalf and not passed onto any third parties.*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed is my/our subscription. £4

Children's Names (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed is a donation to The Friends. £ \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Please make cheque's payable to:  
**Friends of Footh Cray Meadows**  
and send them along with your completed form to:

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

**John Burgess**  
**FFCM Membership Secretary**  
**168 North Cray Road**  
**North Cray**  
**Kent DA14 5EL**

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Bexley Council (unless otherwise stated).

