

| | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|

Dagnam Park - remembered

Dave Sampson lived in Harold Hill from 1950 until 2002. He visited the park throughout the period and started recording and photographing during the seventies. He has kindly allowed us to publish these notes that he has written along with lists of the Birds, Butterflies and Dragonflies that he recorded. Dave's photographs can also be seen throughout this website. Dave was the most dedicated and accomplished wildlife photographer in Dagnam Park in those early years. In those days it was all done on roll film, no phones no ipods, no digital it was all 35mm film that had to be developed and printed over the next week or so (if you could afford it)

Thanks Dave, from me and all the other "Friends of Dagnam Park".

DAGNAM PARK - REMEMBERED. by Dave Sampson

Although its (arguably ill-defined) boundaries are likely to have changed significantly, the history of Dagnam Park can be traced back to the late 13th Century. In modern times, since it was sold to the then L.C.C. (London County Council) in the late 1940's, it has been known colloquially as The Manoby different recorders ory), to the east by Wrightsbridge Road, part of Weald Brook, and Osiers Wood, to the south-east by Fir Wood and Maylands Golf Course, to the south by Kings Wood and Pyrigo schools, Duck Wood and Harold Hill Estate, and to the west by Hatters Wood and Harold Hill Estate. I have known Dagnam Park all my life; my family moved into Harold Hill from East London in 1950 and I have many childhood memories of visiting the Park. It could be said that I only became aware of its true ecological importance when I began bird watching on a semi-serious level in 1975. I began to understand the role natural influences had in shaping the Park over the years, and, more importantly, how the natural progression of the Park's flora and fauna had been affected by social factors.

I suppose my earliest recollection of the Park was its woodland areas, because that is where I usually played as a child. Hatters Wood to the south-west has altered substantially over the years. By far the largest area of mainly ancient deciduous woodland, largely Hornbeam, Oak and to a lesser extent, Sycamore, has been thinned out considerably by Havering Council (previously the L.C.C.); in particular, following the great storm of 1987 when considerable damage was wrought which changed the face of the wood literally overnight.

Duck Wood, which borders the Ridge, which itself was originally allotments, is now used as playing fields by Kings Wood School (formerly Harrowfields Secondary Modern). It comprises mainly coppiced Hornbeam, with some Sycamore and Hazel, and has been managed as a Community Nature Reserve by the London Wildlife Trust since 1985. Burnt Wood, again comprising mainly Hornbeam and Sycamore, bordered the farmland surrounding the Park to the north-east and was arguably the "jewel in the crown"

because it was a peaceful haven and, more significantly perhaps, was a hugely enjoyable area to observe Kingfishers along the Weald Brook which formed its northern flank. Regrettably it succumbed to the M25 development in the early 1980's and is now really only a shadow of its former self.

Osiers Wood adjoins the southern flank of the Weald Brook which borders the Park to the north-east and along with Fir Wood has remained largely intact. It comprises mainly Hornbeam and Sycamore. Regrettably, despite some screening, noise from the M25 which runs adjacent to its northern flank, virtually drowns out any birdsong, and as a consequence Osiers Wood is no longer the peaceful haven it once was. Fir Wood itself, something of a misnomer now, since to my knowledge, there are only two Scots Pine remaining in the entire wood, comprises mainly Sycamore and Hornbeam, with Elm to the east, has remained largely untouched.

The Park's lakes and ponds have seen many changes, regrettably largely to their detriment, since my childhood. Since the mid 1980's the waters known colloquially as Green Lake, Perch Pond (probably also known on older maps as the Cow Pond), and Lily Pond have been leased to the Brookside Angling Club which has used them all from time to time for angling competitions. Members of the public also have access for angling through a bailiff system operated by the Club.

It is to my deep regret that all major waters in the Park have suffered greatly from misuse and neglect over the years; this is not necessarily since being leased out, but in my opinion mismanagement is as much to blame as general vandalism.

For example, the Green Lake had an extensive area of Yellow Flags and Bulrush to its eastern flank when I first began visiting the Park in the late 1950's. In addition, it was surrounded by trees; one of the only two Wild Service trees in the entire Park grew on its north-eastern bank, until its demise in the early 1980's. Vandalism, mainly in the form of arson, has almost eliminated a significant number of trees and shrubs, and the hawthorns along the southern and eastern banks have been systematically thinned out by anglers and the like. Arguably the only positive thing to come out of the leasing arrangement was the de-silting, and subsequent replacement of fish stock in 1998.

Mallard and Moorhens both nest here, although recent breeding success has been sporadic. Kingfishers have visited regularly and single Little Grebes have also been observed. A pair of Canada Geese have enjoyed mixed fortunes in rearing offspring in recent years, with the female unfortunately succumbing to an attack by a dog several years back. The male has since found another mate and this year (2002) the pair nested on the small island at the eastern end of the lake, and it remains to be seen if they are ultimately successful in rearing a family.

The Lily Pond too has changed. Again, a significant area of Willow and Yellow Flag on its western flank has slowly diminished over the years, together with a sizeable area of Bamboo and Flowering Rush.

The introduction of larger, not merely native, fish species, has been the harbinger of poaching in the past two years, which itself has created problems for the Club, but appears to have had little if any detrimental effect on the wildlife using the pond.

Moorhens, Coot and Mallard have all nested successfully. Canada Geese and Little Grebe have attempted breeding, but have failed, probably due to disturbance.

The Perch (or Cow) Pond has altered greatly, with the loss of almost the entire tree population around its banks. The Yellow Flag bed on its northern edge has gradually diminished too, with little more than a sliver remaining as cover for the Moorhens, Coot and Mallard which nest there. A pair of Garganey and Little Grebe visited the pond briefly in the Spring of 1985 and 2002 respectively (neither actually nested), and single Water Rails were present for several days in the Spring of 1986 and 1990.

At the time of writing a pair of Mandarin Ducks have occupied a hole in an Oak located not 100 yards from the north-western edge of the pond (I have assumed that a female was probably on eggs and was therefore out of view). Breeding has yet to be confirmed, but previously there have been only two recorded breeding attempts, the first being in a tree-hole in Fir Wood in 1992 when eight ducklings were seen initially and the second being in 1993 when just two ducklings were observed along Weald Brook.

The Tennis Court Pond, located between the Green Lake and (the now defunct) tennis courts near the main Park entrance, has until recently been largely unaffected by outside factors. It has been gradually drying out due to silting and a succession of dry summers until 2000, but following a programme of regeneration instigated by Havering Council in

conjunction with the Mammalian and Reptile Society, the pond, along with several other small ponds in the Park, has enjoyed a new lease of life as a consequence of excavation and the planned introduction of Great Crested Newts, Common(?) Frogs and Common (?) Toads (the latter of which has yet to materialize).

Regrettably this work also resulted in the loss of some Willow habitat, which was important to migrant bird species such as Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler and both Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, especially during the Autumn migration. In addition an area of Flowering Rush was damaged and although a small patch still remains, it has been significantly reduced in size. This was another sad loss, although we hope unintentional on the part of those managing the work. (Flowering Rush had fully recovered by 2003, see picture)

It is worthy of note that the excavation of some of these ponds, namely in the region of the Park known as the Sallows (which borders the northern fringes of the school fields on what was known as the Ridge) has resulted in an increase in the summer populations of damselflies and dragonflies. The Sallows in particular has seen new breeding species such as Emerald Damselfly (probably unknown prior to 1999) and a healthy increase in other species, namely: Azure and Common Blue Damselfly; Large Red Damselfly; Red-eyed Damselfly; Four-Spot and Broad-bodied Chaser; Southern, Brown and Migrant Hawker; Emperor Dragonfly; and both Common and Ruddy Darter. It is to be hoped that the Small Red-eyed Damselfly (which has only recently colonized Southern Britain, including parts of Havering) will be a welcome addition in the near future.

The Round Pond, an old concrete bathing pool within the walled garden belonging to Dagnams Mansion, remains mainly unscathed. Dry summers of recent years had left it largely grassed over, that is, until the wet winters and springs of 2000 and 2001 when heavy rains rejuvenated the pond. It remains an excellent site for observing Common and Ruddy Darter, Broad-bodied and Four-Spot Chaser, and Emperor Dragonfly. It is also a good area for butterflies. In recent years Chiffchaff, Common Whitethroat and Blackcap have enjoyed good breeding success in the surrounding thickets that are mainly Sycamore, Hornbeam and Oak.

To the east of the Round Pond lies the Dinosaur Pond which, especially in the mid-late 1960's, most definitely had a prehistoric atmosphere, thanks largely to the number of fallen elms in the vicinity. It may not have seen any dinosaurs as such, but its main claim to fame is that it provided an excellent habitat for a pair of Mandarin Duck in 1974 (which may or may not have bred) and a superb Long-eared Owl which visited for just one day in October 1990 giving tantalizing glimpses through the trees. Nowadays the character of the Pond bears little resemblance to its Jurassic tag.

The area known locally as the Moat to the south and bordering Pyrgo School has until recently been largely overgrown; the water in the moat is, to all intents and purposes, stagnant in places due to the enormous amount of domestic rubbish left languishing there by thoughtless Harold Hill residents (though probably not those who live directly on the Park boundaries). Fortunately, the moat too has been rejuvenated along three-quarters of its length as a consequence of clearance undertaken by Havering Council during the winter of 2000/2001. Although largely aesthetic in nature, the work obviously greatly improves the immediate environment, although it remains to be seen whether wildlife actually takes full advantage. And provided the public ceases to use the moat as a dump, the immediate future looks very much more hopeful than hitherto has been the case.

The main area of Dagnam Park, namely the recreational park area, has seen many changes, especially in recent years. Until the mid 1980's good use was put to the parkland for the purposes of sport, mainly football, cricket and rugby, after which the fields were left fallow as grassland mainly to the left of the main path running through the Park. The fields to the right of the path have been left virtually untouched, those used once for rugby are now largely grassland (providing an absolutely stunning array of wild flowers in the first year following the abandonment of sporting activities, but not so good since) and as a consequence the encroachment of scrub is well in advance. An impressive stand of Elm in the scrub area has regrettably long since succumbed to Dutch Elm Disease, and it is doubtful if the area will ever return to its former glory.

The Sallows area (apart from recent excavation of the ponds) has also remained largely intact, except when the fields are cut for silage (usually in late July which is not the most appropriate time to cut in my opinion). All these areas have proved extremely good for insects generally, particularly butterflies and crickets, although recent years have seen a

marked decline in both. Bird species such as Tree Pipit, Yellowhammer and Skylark are sadly gone, as are both Grey and Red-legged Partridge, both of which occurred as breeding species up to the mid 1980's.

All woodland areas have seen terrible vandalism, mainly arson, which has decimated some sites, and which remains a very worrying trait, especially among the young male fraternity of the neighbouring Harold Hill estate. In this latter respect the resurgence of bikers is an alarming trend which doesn't bode at all well for the future of the Park. Apart from obvious noise pollution (nearby residents are especially traumatized by this) considerable damage has occurred, and is continuing to occur, to the main grassland area of the Park.

Bird species such as Hawfinch, Tree Sparrow, Marsh and Willow Tit, no longer occur, even as vagrants. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is just about holding on (no more than two pairs are thought to remain), yet strangely, both Great Spotted and Green Woodpecker are present in fairly good numbers. Treecreeper and Nuthatch have declined markedly, along with most woodland bird species, whilst the Tawny Owl is down to probably two pairs (one pair in Duck Wood and Hatters Wood respectively, and these do not necessarily breed every year). Common Kestrel is anything but common with just two breeding pairs, neither actually breeds specifically within Park boundaries, but on the margins. But a note of optimism lies in the increase in breeding pairs of Sparrowhawk, possibly up to three pairs in 2000, and with the recent return of Little Owl (after an eight year gap) which has brought off at least one brood in each of the past three years. Records of Hobby are encouragingly good, with a marked increase in recent years and it is surely only a matter of time before the Park sees its first breeding success for this attractive falcon.

The farmland which surrounds the Park on three sides is almost entirely set-aside these days and although this was encouraging to begin with, it has not in fact proved the success that was envisaged. Surprisingly, it has not encouraged either of the two partridge species, and although Pheasants are present they are not especially common any longer. Tree Pipits and Skylarks have not returned to the fields. Lapwings too no longer breed as they once attempted to do on the Osiers fields; indeed, one is very lucky even to see the species in flight over the Park these days.

Strangely, since set-aside was established in the late 1980's we no longer see Ring Ouzel during the Spring and Autumn passage, although it is true to say that the species mainly occurred in the main Park fields well within the boundary, or on adjacent school fields, so one must assume that other factors are to blame for their absence. There is very little doubt that general disturbance, together with vandalism has been a major contributing factor, but changes in farming practices, and more especially climatic changes, are more likely to be the major cause of the decline, and may well set the course for the future more than any other aspect.

My personal species count is currently 134, although our combined efforts far exceed that. Highlights have included my first Honey Buzzard in May 1981. Our first Hawfinch was seen later the same year, and in subsequent years observing wintering flocks of this stunningly attractive finch peaked at about 50 individuals in Duck Wood in the late 1980's. The species no longer occurs in the Park. Spring Wood Warblers are now scarce, together with Spring Pied Flycatchers (I particularly remember my first, and only, Spring male in May 1982). But arguably the most spectacular observation involved the somewhat enigmatic Waxwing involved a count of 23 roosting birds observed in the Scrub area on 5 April 1996 (part of a huge influx of the species over the UK and doubtless a break-off group from the flock of 200 or so individuals seen at the Tesco superstore at Harold Park the previous month).

Other rarities I have observed include: Spoonbill (April 1980); Golden Oriole (June 1983); Arctic Skua (October 1988 and August 1992); Richard's Pipit (October 1989); Mediterranean Gull (March 1990); Long Eared Owl (October 1990); Woodlark (March 1994); Western Marsh Harrier (September 1995); Yellow-browed Warbler (October 1996); Northern Goshawk (March 1999); and Mealy Redpoll (February 2002).

Sizeable flocks of Whimbrel were a regular sight during the spring and autumn passage in the 1980's, but are now a thing of the past. Other waders such as Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit also occurred occasionally, but no longer grace our year lists. Woodcock still occur regularly during the winter months, yet sightings of Common Snipe are rare.

Golden Plover occur very infrequently. There has been one record of Common Redshank during an exceptionally cold spell in January 1985, and a remarkable record of a lone

Oystercatcher (not surprisingly it was a flight view) in May 1984. But wader records generally are extremely infrequent these days. A full list of species I have observed over the years appears in the Annex.

Species I have not personally observed include: Hoopoe; Great Grey Shrike; Barn Owl; Corncrake; Cirl Bunting; Green Sandpiper; Common Sandpiper; Garganey; Goosander; and Red Kite..... an impressive list in anyone's book.

In recent years I have also taken to recording Butterflies, Dragonflies and Damselflies which has proved extremely interesting and rewarding. Especially so were the first Park record of Marbled White (an itinerant individual in July 1999) and the first record of Ringlet (July 2001), albeit just outside the Park boundary, but a species clearly on the increase. But arguably the most exciting occurred in the Summer of 2000 when, following a huge invasion of Clouded Yellow nationally, I observed up to nine individuals (including two female of the "helice" form) on the Osiers fields, and at the same time Painted Lady which peaked at a staggering 40 individuals.

Other highlights include Brown Argus (which is just about holding on), and in the field of Odonata, both Emerald Damselfly and Banded Demoiselle. There is a distinct possibility that Small Red-eyed Damselfly will appear on the Park list in the not too distant future, since the species has been recorded at several relatively near sites in Havering as well as sites around Brentwood and Shenfield, flowing the first national sightings in 1999.

Dagnam Park has never been renowned for its mammalian species. Foxes are definitely on the increase. The population of semi-wild [Fallow Deer](#) (from large herds on nearby outlying farmlands) has grown markedly in recent years, and gatherings of up to 80 individuals are not uncommon. I have only ever seen one Muntjac which was observed in Lower Hatters in April 1992. To my knowledge no other species has been recorded, other than an impressive Red Deer Stag several years back..... apparently it was thought to have crossed the Thames from the Kent side (I assume it swam!).

Regrettably, the increase in Fallow has led to a sharp increase in incidents of poaching on an unprecedented scale, as has been evidenced by the increasing volume of abandoned hocks and other body parts being found both on the farmlands surrounding the Park and within the Park itself. From all accounts this unsavoury activity appears to be very well organized.

Badgers have apparently been seen in and around Duck Wood, although to date they have eluded me; I am fairly confident that those that have been observed are nomadic individuals from outlying areas such as the nearby Oaks woodland from which access (for mammals, of course) can be gained via a network of culverts which run beneath the M25 and minor roads.

Rabbits are once again common, though are fairly inconspicuous most of the time. Brown Hare was known to occupy the farmlands surrounding the Park (mainly the Osiers fields) up to the late 1970's. Other, less common, species of mammal which occur in the Park include: Weasel; Stoat; Common and Water Shrew; Water Vole (mainly along Weald Brook); and both Bank and Field Vole. Both Yellow-necked Mouse and the Wood Mouse are probably present in good numbers, although I haven't seen either for several years. Others such as Field Mouse and House Mouse remain common, and along with Field Vole probably form the major prey species of Common Kestrel, and the two Owl species. Harvest Mice were probably present in good numbers many years ago, but have long since vanished.

To my knowledge there have been only three species of bat recorded; Pipistrelle and Noctule have been relatively common (though less so nowadays, even despite the bat boxes which have been erected throughout the Park), and Daubenton's Bat, which probably hasn't been observed for 30 years or more.

Grey Squirrels are common and the population is currently at its highest concentration for many years; indeed, it could be said that they are truly vermin in the accepted sense.

The Brown (or Norway) Rat population has exploded in recent years, doubtless the consequence of mild winters, although the throwaway attitude of the human race and the simply staggering amount of refuse dumped in the Park has undoubtedly contributed.

I cannot readily say whether the Park has a particular reputation for its flora. There is the obvious splendour of Hatters Wood and Osiers Wood in Spring, both of which hold impressive displays of Wood Anemone, Violet, Lesser and Greater Periwinkle, Lesser and Greater Stitchwort, and Bluebells. North Hatters/Priory Wood are excellent for Snowdrops and Snowflakes. Another claim to fame could be said to be the diminishing stand of

Spotted Orchid, of which more a little later. There remain very isolated pockets of Primrose and Cowslip, which seem to be diminishing year by year, and of course the ancient meadows with impressive displays of Cat's Ear and Pignut.

As far as its arboreal delights are concerned there are to my knowledge only four remaining Wild Service trees and a lone Wellingtonia (at least two others were lost to vandalism over the years). In Hatters Wood, one can still find several Holm Oak, some impressive Beeches and pollarded Oaks along with its main claim to fame its Hornbeams. In the mid 1960's a huge [300 year-old Holm Oak](#), (**Editor's note** in her book [Dorina Neave](#) refers to this tree as the Cork Ilex) its spreading lower boughs supported on a ring of wooden sleepers or props, dominated the area between the Perch Pond and Lily Pond. Unfortunately a lightning strike combined with the efforts of vandals saw its eventual demise. It is sadly missed, for it was a marvellous haven for wildlife: Grey Squirrel, Shrews and mice, and a pair of Tawny Owls, together with a variety of woodland birds, to say nothing of a good selection of insects, including butterflies and moths. And of course, aesthetically, it was an immensely imposing sight, the likes of which may never grace the Park again.

Spotted Orchids, though probably long present, first came to my attention in the early 1980's, peaking at around 70 individual spikes in the early 1990's. Sadly, these too have suffered from vandalism over the years, including the consequence of one farmer cutting the grasslands for silage much earlier than usual in one year, which virtually destroyed that year's crop in one fell swoop. Surely this was a good example of the way poor management can lead to unintentional but serious damage. In recent years the display has been somewhat depleted due to the consequences of extremely wet winters and early springs, combined with outright vandalism, and in 2001 only around 30 spikes remained. It is doubtful that they will approach anything like their previous peak again. In conclusion, it has been a sheer pleasure being able to use Dagnam Park for the purposes of observing and recording its flora and fauna, and I have been privileged indeed, never ever taking the Park for granted. Sadly, the demise of some species, regrettably the result of disturbance and general vandalism, and not necessarily down to natural factors such as global warming (which undoubtedly has played its part) has made the Park so much less appealing in recent years. The disturbance factor, mainly the incursion of bikers is one, albeit a major, factor in my decision to leave the area. But Dagnam Park will always be a part of me, hence the reason for this album of photographic memories.

David Sampson. April 2002