



FRIENDS OF BUTTS CLOSE AN OCCASIONAL NEWSLETTER

March 2024

Moist...Warm...Lingering...

Not Mills & Boon. I'm referring to the weather. Right now it feels like it's February the 43rd. I am still waiting for those few bright sunny days to come back and *stay*.



The Close has been waiting too, it seems. It's all slowed up, emptied, even. Fewer exercisers, some damp and hurried dog walkers, and this morning 20 pigeons huddled down in the drizzle.

It is nevertheless doing its job as part of the local ecology: managing pollution, and increasing biodiversity.

A recent BBC report¹ said that 'a toxic mix of oil, chemicals and bits of tyre from roads is polluting English waterways and no-one is regularly monitoring it'. A month later the Environment Agency announced that sewage and drainage services will ensure investment to tackle the problem. Anglian Water has pledged £50M. Measures will include installing in-sewer monitors.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-68130715>

Managing Pollution



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CMS

In the winter we salt our roads and use antifreeze. Our tyres and brake discs wear down and need replacing. But where does the metal and rubber, along with a toxic mix of oil and chemicals, end up?

Most goes down the highways drain. These drains are not connected to the foul sewage systems: they are surface water drains that eventually lead to rivers without going through a sewage treatment plant.

They can become overwhelmed in times of intense rainfall, leading to surface water flooding. On Butts Close there is an overflow (left) to mitigate flooding on Bedford Road and the houses on it.

It seems to be working. It was unblocked in 2021 and despite the heavy and persistent rainfall so far there has not been the level of flooding of previous years: see left.

This excess water carries pollutants eastwards through and over the grass before eventually flowing into the pond, then down through culverts to join the river Hiz just behind Sainsbury's car park.

The process of flowing across the Close allows a large amount of the suspended solids to be removed. The pond then has several functions. It acts as a sump at times of high and sudden rainfall, and this helps prevent flooding on Bancroft. The pollutants that sink to the bottom are trapped in the silt. This needs to be cleared away periodically: opposite is a photo taken in 2017. The reeds in the pond break down contaminants through the process of bioremediation², removing excess nutrients and organic pollutants.

The water finally exits via a floating hydroponic reed bed, which is efficient at this cleansing process, before it flows into the Hiz. The photo below left shows the installation of the bed in 2007. This is one of many photographs of Butts Close Pond, alternatively Capswell Pond, in a *Countryside Management Services* record of their work there and on the surrounding areas. The full record is appended: It fascinated me, like finding a box in the attic with photos of your kids when they were young. The Pond has grown up a lot since then.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAyVcR17COs>

Increasing Biodiversity

Hedgerows have been integral to our rural landscape since the Bronze Age, traditionally marking out boundaries and keeping in livestock. They contain hundreds of plant species, provide homes for nesting birds, small mammals and insects, and can capture and store large amounts of carbon.

Butts Close hedges are ready and waiting to join the half a million miles of hedgerows in England, recently mapped by aerial laser technology³. They continue to be cosseted by CMS. It will nevertheless take a few years before what are still mostly spiny saplings start melding laterally to form a true hedge.

In January the CMS also tackled the growth along the south-facing wall of Archer's, opposite the pond. A third of this mature growth was coppiced – cut down to a few inches above ground. Some people contacted me with concern and consternation, and I put their questions to Heidi Hutton, the HCC Senior Projects Officer who manages the CMS Volunteer Teams who were on site in January.

Q. Why has the ground been cleared of all growth except for a few trees on the line of the metal fence? We are always being encouraged to plant more trees, not to cut them down.

HH. This area has been coppiced, which is not the same as cutting down. This means cutting tree growth at a slight angle a few centimetres above ground level. Far from being the end of these plants' lives, coppicing greatly extends the life of most trees, so that coppiced stools (the name of the 'stumps' that are left) may be many hundreds of years old. This is especially true for hazel, which would usually live for around 80 years, but will live for several hundred if regularly coppiced, and the hedgerow along the swimming pool is predominantly hazel. This is an ancient method of prolonging the life of trees to enable there to be a constant supply of materials for fencing, hurdles, baskets, walking sticks and furniture. You can expect to see these shoot up. Newly coppiced trees can grow up to 2m per year, and I would expect near to that kind of growth in this location. It's south facing, the soil is good. The whole line of the hedge was coppiced in 2016, so that gives you an idea of how quickly it grows and I would say that we let it go a bit far, which is why the change is quite dramatic. So it's more like resetting the clock in terms of prolonging the life of these trees.

Q What would have happened if they had been left alone?

HH They would have turned into a line of trees, which is fine, but there are lots of those on Butts Close and no other mature hedgerows (yet). Plus once the line of trees get to a certain height, the vegetation will be thinner at their base and not provide screening along any of the length.

Q What is the likely effect on wildlife now that their habitats have been removed? This seems contrary to a policy of increasing biodiversity.

HH. This will increase biodiversity, as after the first year this stretch of plants will be of varying age and size, which provides a greater variety of habitat than a line of trees all the same age. Coppicing

³ <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/press/high-tech-aerial-mapping-reveals-englands-hedgerow-landscape#:~:text=Key%20findings,support%20biodiversity%20and%20store%20carbon.>

this hedgerow⁴ in thirds is only contributing to the variety of habitat and therefore the diversity. Different species like trees at different stages of development. I appreciate that right now that section looks a bit bare, but it will soon green up in the Spring and there'll be younger shoots that will appeal to certain butterfly species and other insects, in turn providing food for birds and mammals.

Q How long will it take for the growth that has been cut down to regain the size and diversity evident in the eastern part, which as of today has been left in place?

HH The intention is to coppice the next third either next year, or, more likely in 2 years' time, and the last third 2 years after that. Then we'd look to cut the first third again, but this does depend on the rate of regrowth. This is expected to be approximately 2m per year and back to where it is now in 8 years, but we may well keep it managed more regularly than that.

Q. Please confirm that the remaining eastern parts of the strip of trees and scrub (between the bench and Elmside Walk) will remain uncoppiced. This would be in line with the current GAP recommendations on page 20, by following sectional coppice guidelines. I received specific mention of the catkins that are there, which could take many years to replace.

HH The intention is indeed to coppice in sections, with the next third either next year, or, more likely in 2 years' time, and the last third 2 years after that. Then we'd look to cut the first third again but this does depend on the rate of regrowth. Hazel catkins will return on the cut section either next winter or the one after that. Hazels thrive on being coppiced. What I did notice when we were coppicing was that there is quite a bit of space between the plants. Normally, we would look to fill the gaps to create a denser hedgerow. I will talk to my manager about this to see if we agree this would be appropriate here. If so, we'd look to fill the gaps next winter.

Many thanks, Heidi.



Coppiced Hazel

Photos: Simon Maddison

⁴ When is a hedge a hedgerow? I have appended an explanation for my fellow nerds.

Forthcoming Events

Andrew Mills has advised that the bookings so far are as follows:

Wellness Walking Festival (agreed) 23rd March

Go Tri Hitchin (agreed) Mar 24th and April 28th

Thurston's Fair (provisional) 3rd – 15th June

Hitchin Triathlon (provisional) 7th July

No news about the Circus at the present time.

Hitchin Forum's Litterpicking Day is on Sunday March 24th.



If you want to join the Butts Close Team and have not registered already, please email Bill Sellicks at hflitterpick@gmail.com. This is a photo of last Autumn's bunch.

Tony Riley
for
Friends of Butts Close
March 2024

APPENDIX 1 – Hedges and Hedgerows

A **hedge** is a line of woody vegetation that has been subject to management so that trees no longer take their natural shape. A **hedgerow** comprises the line of all the growth between fields, roadways or buildings. A hedgerow⁵ may include hedges, trees, shrubs and grasses.

Most of us (and I suspect most FoBC members) would class ourselves as urban gardeners - as do I - and the distinction between a hedge and a hedgerow may be lost on many of us. I had a vaguely generic 'hedge', encompassing everything from tortured topiary to scraggly bushes. But a hedgerow is a wilder thing, and it was a hedgerow that was agreed upon around 2007, to be planted along the south side of the swimming pool curtilage and opposite the pond. This is quite different from (as an example) the neatly squared-off hedge that runs alongside the metal fencing of the west-facing section.

Hedgerows are no longer planted to provide a ready stock of pliable materials. Nowadays a hedgerow is distinguished by its very high level of biodiversity, not least with a dense and deep root system, and, managed properly, it will maintain this for centuries. In a sense a hedgerow is a link to our very distant Bronze Age agricultural past. It may contain stretches of hedging, but its contribution to landscape aesthetics will tend to remain secondary. A hedge on the other hand does tend to be distinguished by its contribution to landscape or garden aesthetics.

⁵ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/1800/wood-wise-hedgerows-and-hedgerow-trees.pdf>

APPENDIX 2 – CMS' work on Butts Close in 2007

Butt's Close Pond, Hitchin



Butt's Close gets an injection of wildlife

Everything's blooming at Butts Close in Hitchin now that CMS and North Herts District Council have given it a thorough makeover. The pond has been transformed from a characterless hole in the ground to a wildlife haven. Newly created shallow edges have been planted with attractive species such as Water Mint, Marsh Marigold and Purple Loosestrife. A floating hydroponic reed bed filter will remove nutrients to improve water quality.

Grass around the pond is now allowed to grow longer. It will be cut and collected annually in the same way as a traditional hay meadow although mowing continues along pathways. Two nearby willows have vigorous new growth following pollarding which will extend the life of the trees. A third willow - a large weeping variety - has had its crown reduced and reshaped to cut down on the shade it casts over the water and the number of leaves that fall. New native tree and shrub beds have been planted to provide cover and food for birds.

The work has been funded by NHDC and the Landfill Community Fund through Groundwork Hertfordshire.

Project detail

Butt's Close is a 4.5hectare (11.2 acres) greenspace in the heart of Hitchin. It is made up of closely cut grass and formal tree planting, and until recently it offered limited opportunities to local wildlife and those who would like to experience it. Now CMS are changing all that!



At the request of site owners, North Herts District Council, CMS produced a Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) to guide the management of the site until 2012. The plan identified one corner of the site as having the potential to offer a small haven for wildlife. The area contained a fairly formal pond that was edged by concrete gabions and heavily shaded by a number of large willow trees. The boundaries were unsightly and had become difficult to manage. The area was hidden from the many people who pass by each day on the busy A505 from Hitchin to Bedford.

A number of key actions were necessary in order to transform this dull and featureless hole in the ground into a vibrant area for wildlife.

Trees

Trees needed to be managed to reduce the amount of shade they cast, cut down on the number of leaves that fell into the pond and allow people to see it.



Two large willows were pollarded; a traditional management technique where branches are cut back severely and allowed to re-grow from the cut ends. This reduces the size and weight of the crown of the tree.

The prominent weeping willow was treated less aggressively. The crown was gently reduced and re-balanced to create a pleasing shape whilst reducing shade cast and improving access to manage the ground beneath.



Above, clockwise from left: Trees shading pond before, First cut of the willow, Trees after the cut, Trees before

Pond

The pond had a number of problems. The banks were steep and edged with concrete gabions and slabs, meaning that few plants could grow. The water suffered from large algal blooms - these are a sign of high nutrient levels entering the water.

Shallow marginal areas were created and planted with colourful native species such as water mint, marsh marigold and ragged robin. Where the banks are at their steepest Coir (coconut fibre) bio rolls planted with rushes, sedges, reeds and flag iris were installed.

A floating reed bed was constructed from an interlinked tubular framework and installed close to the water inlet. This was covered by a thick mat of coir pillows planted with common reed and anchored to the pond base. This hydroponic reed bed will suck unwanted nutrients from the water reducing algal blooms. When established it will be 50% more efficient than a traditionally planted bed.



Above, clockwise from left: Pond before, Installing the bioroll, Pond after, Building the reed bed

Works to the pond have now been completed and the CMS went back to create areas of native tree and shrub planting around the site boundaries. These provide colour throughout the year along with cover and food for wild birds.



Pond plants are beginning to settle in and the surrounding meadow recovers from the disturbance.



Pond plants are now beginning to establish themselves.



High summer and all of the bare earth has been reclaimed by surrounding vegetation and the pollarded willow trees are now covered in vigorous new growth. The first seasons growth is now in full bloom, emergent plants such as purple loostrife are flourishing.



As the pond enters its second season all of the pond plants are now fully established and ready for the warmer weather of spring. Happy frogs can be seen enjoying the pond and laying their spawn.



The final part of the project is now in place as the protective fence around the native shrub planting is completed.

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