

The 50th Birthday of the

MILTON KEYNES
NATURAL
HISTORY
SOCIETY



2018

With Thanks

We would like to give a special thank you to all those that contributed to this 50th Anniversary Magpie financially, editorially or with articles and pictures/illustrations

Estelle Bailey, David Lindo, Lewis Dickinson, Steve Brady, Roy Maycock, Andy Mc Veigh, Linda Murphy, Sue Hetherington, Julie Lane, Tony Wood, Martin Kincaid, Andy Harding, Jennifer Mercer, Justin Long, Gordon Redford, Francis Higgs, Peter Hassett, and Mary & Phil Sarre.

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Forewords

Estelle Bailey

Chief Executive

Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust

Founded 50 years ago in 1968 Milton Keynes Natural History Society with its 100 members today maintains the spirit and drive of its early founders to record and monitor the local natural history of the MK area. The society is the 'conscience' of the MK area in Buckinghamshire, working hard to educate and share information locally about wildlife. It is so impressive to have maintained such an active membership over the years, who still meet weekly. The group is an inspiration to all those passionate about understanding the natural world and we here at BBOWT are proud to be associated with the society. Happy 50th anniversary.

David Lindo

The Urban Birder

11 November 2018

Well, the Milton Keynes Natural History Society is 50 years old! What an achievement! Many congratulations!

Many things have happened in the past 50 years, not least the fact that I have walked the fair streets (and indeed, the contiguous green lands) of Milton Keynes a number of times. Far from being the roundabout blighted corner of England that is the butt of jokes I, as you all do, see MK as an urban oasis.

And in an age that has seen the rise in popularity of birding and in particular, urban birding, what better place to stare through a pair of

binoculars. But I guess that even Milton Keynes has its fair share of threats to its semi-natural habitats. Over the years I have grown to realise just how important urban habitats are for our wildlife and conversely, how few city dwellers actually realise this. It has been shown that urban areas are now essential to the survival of bees and that they provide superb roosting, nesting and feeding sites for some bird species. Even brownfield sites and certainly fallow land are magnets for a plethora of wildlife even if some urbanites view these areas as 'waste ground' or at best, somewhere to walk the dog. The nature of the beast is that almost any area of open land in an urban environment is deemed as fair game by developers whose dark shadows waft over these sites as they plan the building of yet another shopping mall. Do not get me wrong as we do need new housing and offices, that is what cities are all about, but what is stopping the architects and planners from building with nature in mind? I think that the developers in Milton Keynes did a relatively good job. Surely it is not that difficult to provide inbuilt nesting and roosting sites within new structures and design the surrounding green areas using native flora and lakes with reed-beds?

Over 80% of the UK's population now live in urban areas and a large amount of those people are disconnected from nature believing that wildlife is only either to be found on television or out in the depths of the countryside away from prying eyes. My feeling is if you cannot get these people into the countryside, then let us bring the countryside to them. We all need space to breathe, contemplate and reflect. It is a prerequisite for healthy minds. From what I have seen, Milton Keynes has made urban spaces more hospitable for nature and you guys will ultimately benefit from the tranquillity and beauty that this brings. All urban areas within the UK should look at Milton Keynes' example and replicate it to encourage natural life even into the heart of our bustling cities.

Introduction – *Lewis Dickinson, Chairman*

It is with great pleasure that we celebrate the Milton Keynes Natural History Society's 50th birthday this year!

A year on from the city of Milton Keynes 50th birthday celebrations whose events were still fresh in the memory of many Society members we felt we had to do something special to commemorate the Society's own half century.

So a celebratory event was put together by the committee, supported by members, back in March. Held in a packed out auditorium, close to 200 people were present, we were delighted to have a special guest talk too! The end of the event was finished off wonderfully by presenting Roy Maycock, our long-standing President, with a portrait of a Badger, having strong personal significance from his involvement in the early days of Milton Keynes' construction.

Being just over half the age of the Society makes for some interesting thoughts, the Society was celebrating its 25th birthday when I was 2! Whilst I personally can't remember what I was doing at 2 years old (though I can safely say eating, sleeping, and my parents struggling to keep me in one place) the Society does have record of its 25 years of existence in the form of the "Milton Keynes Natural History Society – The First Twenty-Five Years 1968 – 1993" booklet.

It is an interesting read for me to find out about the environment at the time and some of the ongoing projects in the early days as Milton Keynes was being built.

Water Vole © Kate Wyatt



It was that 25 years publication that inspired the idea to make a 50th edition Magpie. We have had wonderful input from many of our members and resident experts within the Society to make this edition so special and I sincerely hope you enjoy reading it! Happy Birthday to MKNHS!

Origins of the Society – *Edited excerpts from “The First 25 Years”*

The Milton Keynes Natural History Society (MKNHS) Journal Number 3 (1978), carried two articles relating to the Society's early years. The first of these was an obituary to Reg Mills who had been one of the founder members; the other briefly outlined the Society's foundation. The excerpt below is an edited and augmented summary of these articles.

For about four years prior to 1968, Don Freeman had tried to start a Natural History Group in Bletchley. He was unsuccessful until he suggested to West Bletchley Community Association that such a group might be included in its activities. An art group also met at the Community Centre, with Reg Mills as a member. Another artist lived in the flat above Bernard Frewin, who was at that time doing taxidermy. This rather tenuous link led to Don meeting with Reg and Bernard on March 15th 1968.

The Bletchley Gazette of February 8th 1968 carried a photograph of Don with his son and some stick insects. The accompanying text said that Don was planning to run a natural history group and suggested that interested people might contact him. Roy Maycock made contact and, on Friday 22nd March, what might be called the first meeting of the Society took place at the West Bletchley Community Centre. Apart from the four founding members, one other adult was

present and about a dozen children, presumably they found out about the meeting through the Community Association. Four talks were given to the children on Taxidermy, Snakes, Plants and Prehistoric Animals, reflecting the interests of the adults.

It had already been decided that meetings would be held weekly and that the adults should pay 2 shillings (10p) on attendance and children 9 old pence (4 ½p). From there, a proportion would go to the Community Association. Weekly fees continued to be paid until 1984, although annual subscriptions had been introduced already by then. Part of the success of the Society may well be due to the frequency of its meetings, although this does sometimes put pressure on the programme organiser. However, as the adults met after the children, it was often necessary to prepare two events for one evening!

The Gazette article stated Don's aims for the group as being to "help conserve the natural history around Bletchley and to make a survey of wildlife in Bletchley and they surrounding district". Bletchley, then, was the focus of attention and the group was known as the Bletchley Natural History Society.

To promote and publicise the Society, an ambitious exhibition was staged in the Co-op Hall in Bletchley, in June 1968. A steady flow of visitors came during the day and Ron Arnold became a regular attendee at meetings thereafter. Later in the year two more adults joined and the number of juniors stabilised around fifteen.

In September, reorganisation began and records of committee meetings, at least, were kept. Until then the adults had continued to chat after the juniors had gone and business seemed to be of little significance!

Early in 1969, Coopers of Berkhamsted sent John Wickham to give a talk to the Society – and he is still with us today! Norman Scarfe

joined at about the same time and later he became Treasurer of the Society for four years as well as being Secretary of the Bradwell Abbey Research Committee, set up to liaise with the new Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

The first Annual General Meeting on March 14th 1969 saw more organisation, with a Constitution being presented for approval and a name change to include Milton Keynes. The Society's aims were established:

- To promote public interest in wildlife
- To provide a meeting place for people with natural history interests
- To encourage the study and the preservation of our flora and fauna
- To provide a forum for natural history debate

Already the influence of the impending development of Milton Keynes was making itself felt and the fulfilment of the Society's aims may be matched to this.

The main method used to publicise the Society and to promote an interest in wildlife has been through exhibitions, a number of which were held at the Community Centre between 1969 and 1971. From 1969 to 1976, some most effective display stands were prepared for Bletchley Arts & Crafts exhibitions – the main show in the area at the time. The County Museum at Aylesbury also allowed us to use their display gallery for a month in 1972.

In the 1990s, there had been exhibits at the Bradwell Abbey Open Days, Expos in Middleton Hall, Ousedale School, BBONT (now BBOWT) Aylesbury, the Central Library in Milton Keynes and various Building Societies. The photographic talents of the members have and always will be frequently admired where the Society sets up stands, our photographic banner being a testament to that.

During one winter, various members promoted natural history by giving a series of lectures for the Workers' Educational Association! In November 1971, a different opportunity to promote ourselves and wildlife arose in the form of a full page spread of information, photographs and letters, presented in the Bucks Standard newspaper. This activity continued to December 1972 and the magpie logo, designed by Bob Mandale as part of the margin display, stayed with us!

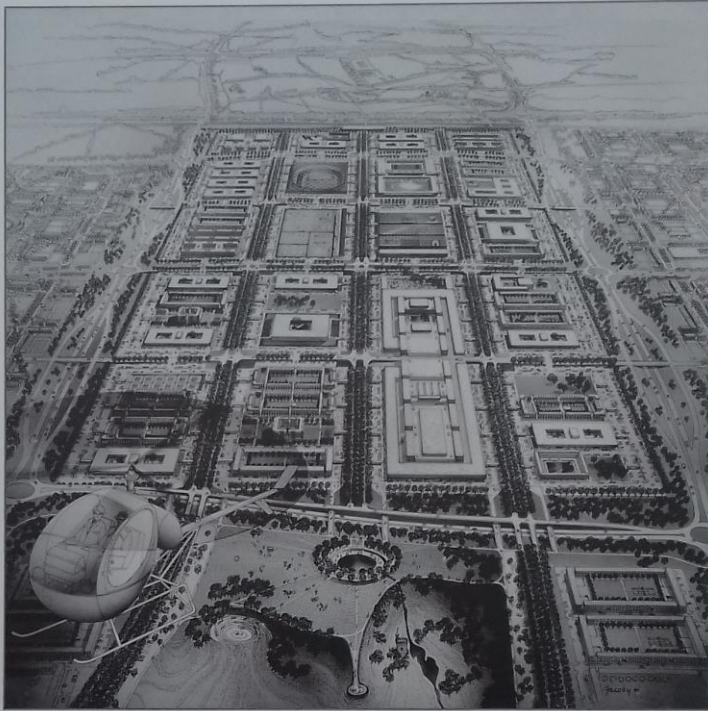
The meeting places used by the society have changed over the years but the number of people who have attended meetings has always been great. By 1993, over 275 adults had "passed through the books" i.e. they have paid at least one subscription. The current membership is certainly the highest in the Society's history, which was also a statement made in the 1993 edition! A good core of our members have been with us for the duration and we thank them for their loyalty.

Howe Park Wood had historically been the site of much activity by members of the Society. Its flora and fauna are well-known, the structure of the wood has been the subject of a study by Linda Murphy (talked about in her article more below) and conservation/survey work is carried out on a regular basis. No other area had received so much attention from Society members but a number of other sites have certainly benefited from members' expertise and physical activity.

Among the Society's members there are many that are deeply involved in wildlife and have studied the wildlife of the Milton Keynes area, contributing to the publishing of five MKNHS Journals. These carry articles of high quality and reflect well on their authors, they are well worth reading if you manage to get your hands on a copy.

Heated natural history debate has always been a feature of Society meetings, no more so than when Milton Keynes was in its infancy.

We shall never know how much impact we had, although the adoption by Milton Keynes Development Corporation of a Badger Policy, largely drawn up by Bernard Frewin, and its subsequent implementation, gives some idea as to the importance of voices for nature were in those early days.



CENTRAL MILTON KEYNES IN 1990

Officers List – *Updated by Steve Brady*

President 1969 – 1975 Jill Royston 1975 – 1991 Gordon Osborn 1992 - Roy Maycock	Vice-Presidents 1969 – 1974 Mrs Day 1969 – 1977 Reg Mills 1975 – 1988 Jill Royston 1988 – 1997 Kate Hawkins 1997 – 1998 Vacancy 1998 – 2012 Professor Alan Brook MBE 1998 - John Wickham 2016 - Martin Kincaid
Chairman 1968 – 1969 Don Freeman 1970 – 1977 John Wickham 1977 – 1979 Roy Maycock 1981 – 1983 Bob Mandale 1983 – 1985 Ron Arnold 1985 – 1989 George Mahoney 1989 – 1993 Peter Kent 1993 – 1996 Mike Killeby 1996 – 1998 Dave Roberts	1998 – 2000 Linda Murphy 2000 – 2004 Alan Nelson 2004 – 2008 Michael Sheridan 2008 – 2012 Steve Brady 2012 – 2014 Martin Kincaid 2014 – 2016 Julie Lane 2016 – 2018 Julie Lane/Linda Murphy (Jointly) 2018 - Lewis Dickinson
Treasurer 1968 – 1970 Bernard Frewin 1970 – 1974 Norman Scarfe 1974 – 1976 Geoff Balkwill 1976 – 1977 Barry Jackson 1977 – 1978 George Mahoney 1978 – 1980 Barry Jackson	1980 – 1984 Judith Joyce 1984 – 1992 Roy Maycock 1992 – 1999 Joan Lancaster 1999 – 2002 Sue Marie 2002 – 2012 Phillip Brown 2012 – 2016 Ann Strutton 2016 - Joe Clinch
Secretary 1968 – 1975 Ron Arnold 1975 – 1977 Sybil Towns 1977 – 1979 Bob Stott 1979 – 1980 Graham Stockton 1980 – 1983 Pat & Linda Murphy 1983 – 1987 Kent Fox	1987 – 1989 Pat Osborn 1989 – 1992 Linda Murphy 1992 – 2008 Steve Brady 2008 – 2009 Mike Sheridan 2009 – 2012 Julie Lane 2012 – 2018 Steve Brady 2018 - Jane Grisdale

MKNHS 50th Birthday Event!

- Julie Lane & Lewis Dickinson

On Tuesday 27th March 2018 we held our 50th Anniversary event at the beautiful Chrysalis Theatre at Camphill in Milton Keynes.

It was a wonderful evening of celebrating our 50 years of existence.

Our initial fears that the Theatre which seats 200 might feel rather empty were completely unfounded as there were very few available seats left and the foyer was full to bursting at the interval. There was a lovely atmosphere of people meeting old friends and catching up, a real buzz!



The evening started slightly tensely as our poor speaker Patrick Barkham was held up in traffic on the A14 and only arrived 10 minutes before the talk was due to start. In his words he was 'a bit flustered' at the beginning but he recovered quickly and gave an excellent talk which left many of us yearning to visit some of the many islands dotted around our large island.

Peter Hassett had prepared a presentation about the Society from its beginnings to the present day which was a lovely start to the evening



(you can view the presentation on the website). Lewis our new Chairman said a few words to introduce himself and at the end of the evening the Mayor of Milton Keynes David Hopkins presented our esteemed President Roy Maycock with a painting of a badger to mark his 50

years as a founder member and pillar of the Society. The evening was a wonderful team effort by all concerned which just goes to show what a special Society we have. Here's to the next 50 years!

What follows is just a few of the many comments we have received starting with one from the Mayor:

"Susan and I found the evening enlightening and compelling with the guest speaker Patrick Barkham truly engaging as he took us on an animated tour of Britain's finest islands. Please pass on my congratulations to your President Roy Maycock for fifty outstanding years of committed service to the Society. I felt privileged to present him with the splendid picture of the badger."

"Last night was very special."

"What an excellent evening! The speaker this evening was absolutely amazing. And what turn out. The evening was almost perfect."

"Nice to catch up with many people that we don't get to see very often."

"Tuesday was a fantastic evening in every way and a fitting celebration of the Society's 50 years."

"Well done to everyone for putting on a fantastic evening, which seemed to go down with everyone. A good engaging speaker and great venue."

"Thank you very much for such a wonderful evening we had a really good time and now want to go on a small island for a holiday too!"

Visit our photo gallery on the website to see all the other photos from this evening.

We would finally like to thank everyone who put in the time and effort to have made this event happen, without our dedicated members supporting the Society we couldn't have had a better celebration!

Flora in MK

- Roy Maycock & Andy Mc Veigh

In 1958 part of the area of Buckinghamshire was annexed from the rest of the county with some of it designated for the development of a new town. It included several existing villages but the name Milton Keynes came to be the name for the whole area designated for development and, with the rest, the Borough of Milton Keynes in 1997.

Between 1965 and 1985 surveys of the flora of the whole county of Bucks were carried out. Then, all of the 2 x 2km squares were covered and some were repeated more recently. They listed all species but the scale of them was not detailed enough for the developers.

Unfortunately Society members were few in numbers at the time and the Development Corporation needed more details than we could provide. As much of the area had been inaccessible being farmland or industry there was no time for us to carry out surveys. The Corporation was to "build a city" and plants and animals were not really considered. Now, of course, the area has changed and much of it is accessible despite roads, houses and industries *etc.* Beyond the original designated area there has not been so much change with the towns and villages (though they may be bigger) and the areas of farmland and otherwise much as they were.

As the Society's millennium project we published a book ('Milton Keynes: more than Concrete Cows – real animals and plants') listing all of the plants, fungi and animals we could in the Borough between

about 1968 and 1999. A few of the are still available and it could be a winter (or several winters!) project for someone (or more!) to make



Pyramidal Orchid © Lewis Dickinson

comparisons between then and now. Bee Orchids (*Ophrys apifera*) and Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) have certainly increased as have weeds like Bristly Oxtongue (*Helminthotheca echioides*) often referred to as 'Milton Keynes weed'. All of the chapters in the book were written by experts in their own fields. Some of the groups with the biggest number were: Plants c.1000, Moths c.650, True Flies c.250, Birds c.180, Beetles c.175.

The original designated area certainly shows the most changes in its flora and fauna. There must be losses but there may be gains but the losses must be the greater. Some unchanged features remaining are the three large woods (Linford, Howe Park and Shenley) and access now is free to all – a change with Howe Park for example from the days when it was 'open' to the public for only one day a year (Whit Monday, I believe – and a long walk from Bletchley!).

The main waterways (the River Great Ouse, River Ouzel and Grand Union Canal) now have open access as do many of the small streams which are planned into the appropriate development schemes. In a few cases the original course of the main rivers had to be changed and now, for example, we can record Greater Dodder (*Cuscuta europaea*) along the whole length of the Ouzel in Milton Keynes. Completely new water features are the balancing lakes, be they always wet or a few wet/dry, and these have been developed with a wide range of activities e.g. Willen. At an early stage of the development of Willen North lake part of the area was sown with a 'grassland' mix from an unknown source. From it a few plants of

Californian Lobelia (*Downingia elegans*) grew. At first they were not recognised but an expert came to the rescue to inform us that this was the first record for this plant in Britain. Its native 'home' is by the Woggawogga river of North America! Now, also on the bank of the same lake and on its island shores plants of Grass Poly (*Lythrum hyssopifolia*) survive. This is nationally rare (with only about six sites known in Britain) and it may well have arrived from the large number of birds "having a rest *etc.*" between the sites where the plant is known to exist elsewhere (e.g. a wild fowl sanctuary to the west and Cambridgeshire to the east). More recently the somewhat more insignificant Mudwort (*Limosella aquatica*) has been discovered on the margins of Linford Lakes and Willen North Lake. Apart from these three plants of importance the margins of the balancing lakes do not have much vegetation at all as the water levels are not constant – but that is ideal for the Grass Poly and Mudwort.

It is the planting of trees which have made a tremendous effect on the landscape especially on the major (grid) road verges and on some of the estates.

Unfortunately few are of native species (probably because they grow too slowly!). In a few cases

experimental trials were attempted at establishing a ground flora beneath the trees. One example was the planting of three native species *Primula* (Primrose, Cowslip and Oxlip). At the last known sighting all was well, with all species hybridising freely! Oxlip is almost extinct in Bucks (but it was only ever known from near the Hertfordshire border) so it may have been an error of judgement to have planted it in the first place!



Other new habitats are of ponds and herbaceous areas as they are easily planted and easily recognisable as the seed-mix used is more or less constant with some species certainly not present in the pre-

development years and not native to the area. For example Large Trefoil (*Trifolium aureum*), which is not native, replaces Hop Trefoil (*Trifolium campestre*) which is native!

Before any development took place one of the best-known sites for wild flowers was close to the Bancroft archaeological site. Lower down the hill from there is a stream in the valley. The stream had to be diverted and a small, but wonderful, valley fen was destroyed. Of particular importance was the presence of Common Cotton-grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) at one of just two or three known sites in the whole of Buckinghamshire – a very sad end!

WHAT HAS MKNHS EVER DONE FOR ME??

- Linda Murphy

I've been a member of MKNHS since 1980, a long time but by no means close to being a founder member! There have been many changes to the Society over that time (some no doubt the focus of other articles in this edition of the Magpie) and changes for me such as new jobs and responsibilities, family milestones, new arrivals and losses, moving house, more birthdays that I care to count, but MKNHS has remained a regular feature of my week throughout that time.

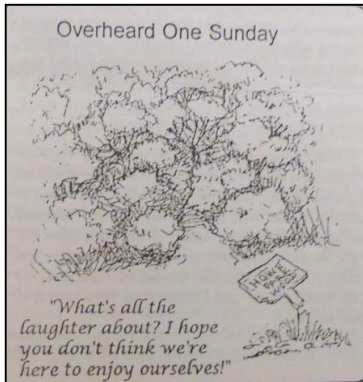
When I first joined, I'd recently moved to MK from Tyneside. I lived in Fishermead before moving to Newport Pagnell. I found out about the Society from an ad in the local paper and went along with husband Pat to a meeting at Rectory Cottages in Bletchley. I think there were about 8 people there (all men)! We were immediately asked if we'd like to join the committee and become Secretary! What a contrast with recent meetings where there must have well over 50 attending, both men and women, although it is still not always easy to find people willing to join the committee. In 1990 I moved to

Oxfordshire and have been here ever since so what keeps me going to MKNHS?

Well, there are some clues above! As I've been coming for a long time and the Society meets every week, of course I have got to know people and we've shared a lot of experiences over the years. However, it's not just social aspects that count. The indoor programme covers such a wide range of topics from individual species, local studies, trips to other parts of the UK and abroad, local/national/international issues, botany, entymology, geology, astronomy, ecology, ornithology, and plenty more '...ologies' besides! I know some members tend to look at the programme and just go along to what they are particularly interested in, but I regularly find that the topics I know least about can prove to be the most interesting and informative. I've learned a lot from speakers, and I am continually impressed by the expertise that we have in the Society. I was always interested in plants, but have learned so much about plant identification by sticking close to Roy during our field meetings in the summer. His endless patience when asked "what's this Roy?" providing names and pointing out features means that looking at plants has become a regular habit when I am out and about and adds a lot of interest to walks/visits wherever I am. The fact that we have a regular programme of visits to local wildlife sites gives a chance to check out plants from year to year and to see how areas change and wildlife adapts (or not) to the developing city of MK.

During the 80s and 90s, the Society was actively involved in managing a compartment of Howe Park Wood on behalf of the MK Development Corporation. Howe Park is an area of ancient woodland which remains one of the top wildlife sites in MK. There were regular work parties in the wood, and here I learned about coppicing, its effects on woodland flora (mimicking the way the canopy opens up when a big tree falls) and how to cut hazel coppice to promote fresh growth, all under the watchful supervision of other members,

particularly Bob Stott, who organised work parties and produced a Management Plan and Work Programme for the Society's input to Howe Park. Those of you who are Park's Trust Volunteers or who take part in similar work with BBOWT or other organisations will know it is



hard but very satisfying to make a practical difference to wildlife in this way. Of course it isn't all hard graft, and Bob was frequently heard to complain that 'we were not there to enjoy ourselves!' As a result of doing this work at Howe Park Wood, I decided to have a closer look at the way coppicing affected the ground flora in the wood and carried out a small-scale study there in 1988 in the

MKNHS compartment. At the time the compartment was divided into sections which were managed in one of three ways: high intervention - coppiced on a 10 year cycle plus clearance of glades and rides; limited management - glades and rides kept clear - areas around Oak, Hornbeam and Crab Apples seedlings cleared; non-intervention areas – sections allowed to degenerate and regenerate naturally with no public access.

My study involved random quadrat sampling of the ground flora in sections with different ages of coppice, limited intervention and some sampling in non-intervention areas. I sampled over a four month period from February, which stretched my ID skills as many plants had not started flowering and there were a lot of mosses! Plastic bags of samples were soon on their way to Roy.... Delving into the undergrowth early on Sunday mornings presented some interesting challenges! Did I try to make a lot of noise so people out walking would know I was there.... or keep quiet and risk giving them a heart attack when I emerged?? One morning I wondered if I ever would emerge as I got myself lost deep in a non-intervention area! Well, as a result of all this I found that the more recent coppice (3-4

years) did generally have a higher diversity of ground flora as might be expected with the increase in light levels provided by removal/thinning of canopy. However it wasn't always the case and factors such as other canopy close by, type of soil and extent of water-logging also need to be examined. I learned that undertaking such studies is not straightforward and there are many aspects that have to be taken into account. When I read reports of other studies or listen to talks, I feel I have a better understanding now.



The breadth of interests and expertise in the Society means that there are plenty of fascinating topics/organisms to discover and get involved in, where other members can help. There are not enough hours in the day to get to grips with everything of interest, but

through MKNHS I got involved in moth trapping. Thanks to George and Frances Higgs who ran moth trapping sessions from time to time I became interested and acquired a moth trap, courtesy of another member at the time, Charlie Blake, who sold me a small second-hand Heath trap. I first started trapping in 1998, and have trapped regularly in my garden ever since. My trips to MK often involved calling in to see George with a few pots of moths for help with ID. He advised on books, but of course there is nothing like looking at the actual moth, having features pointed out, and above all experiencing the tremendous enthusiasm of someone like George! He urged me to contact my County Records Office and County Recorder with the results from my trapping. I was rather hesitant as a 'newbie', but plucked up courage and received encouraging acknowledgements, so continued.

As a result of that, I started going to recorders' conferences and have got involved in Bird, Butterfly and Glow Worm Surveying.... I've

upgraded to a much bigger MV Robinson moth trap, but the Heath trap still comes out for trips to other locations. I've steadily increased the number of species found in my garden (currently over 400) and am now working at the micro moths, but I've never caught anything like the same volume of certain species since the late 90s when on occasions I had more than 300 Heart and Dart moths in a that tiny Heath trap, plus plenty of other species!

So what has MKNHS ever done for me?? These anecdotes are a just a few examples. I think I can sum it up by saying years of fun, friendship, visits to new places, enthusiasm, skills and knowledge which have enriched my interests and enabled me to do some practical things help promote and support wildlife. I still go coppicing (now in Whitecross Green Wood managed by BBOWT), surveying and mothing, not only in my garden, and long may these continue. There are some great role models in MKNHS, busy working for nature into their 90s, not just David Attenborough.



Marbled White © Tony Barker

CONCRETE COWS, ROUNDABOUTS, MKNHS AND ME

- Sue Hetherington

Just before Christmas 2017, Andrew and I moved in to our new home at Gawcott, near Buckingham. Although we are long-time residents of Buckinghamshire, we didn't know "the frozen north". I was less than thrilled to have Milton Keynes as my new huge neighbour – surely it was a depressing, soulless urban sprawl with little more than concrete cows, roads and roundabouts? The one bright spot was knowledge of the existence of Milton Keynes Natural History Society which amazingly met every week. We joined at our first opportunity – which fortuitously transpired to be the Christmas party which was much enjoyed.

As the winter set in with a vengeance, I found I could not settle into my new home. In fact, I was rapidly slipping into depression and anxiety. One thing that I still looked forward to each week were the meetings of MKNHS. I was eventually persuaded to see my GP and through her found "Bucks Healthy Minds", an NHS service. After a self-referral, I attended a short, six week course with them in Aylesbury. This was unfortunately on Tuesday evenings, meaning I had to sacrifice 6 MKNHS meetings, including the special Patrick Barkham 50th anniversary event. It was a shame the course and MKNHS clashed but I am glad I went and that it helped me to start on the road to recovery.

After the course ended, we made a concerted effort to explore MK more fully. When the summer season of MKNHS arrived, with its weekly field trips, we seized the opportunity to be introduced to MK's

special wildlife places. We really had our eyes opened and began to

The Famous Concrete Cows at Bancroft



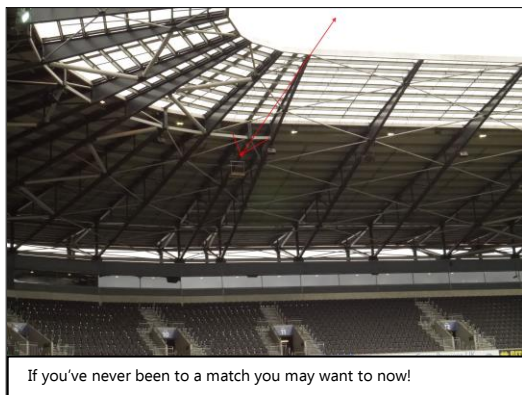
discover that there is a lot more to MK than concrete cows and roundabouts. Actually, I even have a sneaking affection for the concrete cows now and am delighted that the original herd appears to have cloned itself into a second herd!

I love swifts and was excited to hear that Martin Kincaid and Mike LeRoy had set up MK Swifts in 2017. I asked to join in even though Gawcott is well outside the study area. Mike and Martin asked me to take on Newton Longville as it was unallocated. I had a big learning curve, starting with poring over my maps to find out where on earth Newton Longville was (I'd never even heard of it before). Maybe an efficient survey is only possible when there is limited time to spend if there is good local knowledge of the survey area. As I had the former but lacked the latter, my survey of Newton Longville was not particularly successful. I did rather better at home in Gawcott which has become my own little "local patch". I was determined to get a swift nesting box installed on my newbuild home. We cut things very fine and had to buy an "off the peg" box from the RSPB rather than making our own. We managed to install this by the skin of our teeth on 24th April. We crossed our fingers and hoped that Gawcott had swifts. We were thrilled to see a single swift over the village on May Day. As the very odd, late spring progressed the numbers in Gawcott built gradually to considerable numbers and we identified two colony sites (there may be more). We thought it would take at least 2 years for a new Swift box to be occupied but we have high hopes that we will get breeders using the box next year because on 6th June, a group of what we took to be yearling swifts took huge interest in our box. We used a calling system and this undoubtedly contributed to the results.

Whilst I love all nature, whatever it is and wherever it occurs, I take particular pleasure when I find nature has moved in with us. MK has some amazing wildlife if you keep your eyes and ears open.

Although I'm still a MK newcomer, I'm thrilled to know that wildlife has moved in to the metropolis. Of course, that most urban of birds,

the Common Swifts, are with us and Martin Kincaid told me that last year he saw a hobby hunting a flock of them near the Campbell Park area. I have seen reports of a pair of Otter clubs playing in Willen Lake in recent years and I know they are around the waterways of north Bucks. If I kept "life lists" in the way of some birders, otters would be on it as "most wanted".



If you've never been to a match you may want to now!

I also take particular pleasure in knowing that MK is home to a pair of wonderful Peregrine Falcons. If you are unaware, a pair of Peregrine Falcons have taken up residence in the MK Dons stadium a fact which enticed me to a football match for the

first time in at least 40 years. If you visit the MK Dons stadium and want to know where their platform is, look high up into the roof above aisles 10 and 11. Another pair of Peregrines have for several years now bred on a platform installed on the 13th floor of Bucks County Council's County Hall in Aylesbury. Normally, these can be watched from the comfort of your own home via a webcam streamed out to the Internet but unfortunately various hitches prevented that this year. Hopefully things will be back to normal next year with the Aylesbury webcam. If you visit the MK Dons stadium and want to know where their platform is, look high up into the roof above aisles 10 and 11.

When our Bucks urban Peregrine chicks are ringed, as well as the standard BTO metal ring, an orange "darvic" ring is placed on the bird's other leg. This coloured ring has large black unique lettering – eg this year's Aylesbury chicks had the unique letters "PTH". (The MK pair failed to breed so there's no ring identification to look for). The

lettering should be readable by anyone with a decent pair of binoculars and any reports of sightings would be warmly welcomed by the BTO. The juvenile which perished in 2015 and was preserved as a specimen at the Bucks County Museum in Aylesbury (and which incidentally paid us a visit at the Cruck Barn, courtesy of Mike Palmer, the Natural History Curator) demonstrates what you would be looking for.



As the summer of 2018 slips gently into autumn, the MKNHS winter programme of talks has commenced and already the nights are beginning to draw in a bit. I'm looking forward to those indoor meetings.

I want to add my congratulations to the Society on its 50th birthday. Thank you to the founders and all who have picked up the baton over the years and helped me to learn to love those concrete cows, roundabouts and more! And thank you to all my fellow members for being such good new friends.

Snapshots from 35 years of living in and around the Ouse Valley near Olney

-Julie Lane

Although I spend a lot of time away from home travelling I love my valley in all its seasons and moods so I thought I would share some of its magic with you.

The year starts with the cold winter months, dank foggy days interspersed by clear frosty mornings and sometimes the silent cloaking beauty of new snowfall.

This is when the local Kingfishers move into Emberton Park, having spent the summer on the river, and their distinctive piping calls can be heard long before you see the flash of blue.

Groups of dashing handsome male Goosanders congregate on the river and we have a small flock of resident Barnacle Geese – both of these beautiful birds stay in the valley to breed. Early storms cause the Ouse to spill over its banks and flood the valley floor and before it drains away large numbers of swans and other birds leave the river and spread out over the meadows feeding on the fertile vegetation. The occasional Snipe flies up zigzagging from the wet flushes at the base of the valley sides and I once heard the squeal of a skulking water rail. In January 2014 a Turtle Dove who should have been in



Turtle Dove © Ian Pretty

Africa flew into my garden whilst I was doing the Big Garden Birdwatch. It was a lost soul but a very welcome one.

In spring the valley is alive with the constant honking of the Canada and Greylag Geese as they fly in, set up territories and squabble over their patch. The swans turn from living in companionable groups to lifelong couples who viciously attack and see off their neighbours. Otters secretly live their lives and bring up their young alongside us without most of us ever seeing one.

One misty spring day I saw the distinctive shape of an Osprey flying up above on its way to Rutland Water.

In the late spring everywhere is fresh green and the flowers are at their most vibrant.

The Barn field above Olney which has been created and managed for wildlife for about 15 years now is full of orchids in the spring. This year it has been granted the status of a local wildlife site. Local people love it and are proud of it which goes to prove that we can create these special places if we have the will.

In early summer Emberton Park used to swarm with tiny hopping froglets – alas you see very few these days. The number of grass



snake sightings has also reduced dramatically. I often wonder what tipped the balance. Once, about ten years ago, a huge Grass Snake came up from a vole hole between my legs when I was pulling nettles in my garden – quite a shock to my system!

When the oppressive heat of mid-summer arrives everywhere seems quiet and spent, but this is the time to focus down to the little things. The Barn field is ablaze with Scabious, Yellow Rattle and Knapweeds so it's a great place to watch the butterflies and bees in their brief but busy lives. Even my little

garden patch of meadow attracts many insects such as a beautiful Hornet Hoverfly (*Volucella zonaria*) last year.

As the drought bites the flow in the side stream of the Ouse slackens and huge carp can often be seen sitting on the weed just under the surface where the oxygen levels are slightly higher. The ducks have to paddle through a blanket of duckweed.

We have Swifts, House Martins and Swallows that liven our skies and share our homes if we are lucky. It's fun to watch the twittering flocks of House Martins collecting mud for their nests from the banks of the Ouse. On balmy summer evenings the screaming Swifts zip through the town rooftops until it's time for them to circle up into the heavens for the night giving way to the inaudible squeaking of the Pipistrelle bats as they hawk for moths. Daubentons can be seen patrolling the lakes and river surface.

Then the seasons turn again. Autumn mornings see the mist hanging like a blanket in the bottom of the valley until the sun rises high enough to burn it off revealing the fiery autumn colours. Evening strolls are often rewarded by psychedelic sunsets.

The valley once more rings with the evocative sound of geese as they get ready to migrate and one can often hear the croaks of a pair of Ravens flying overhead back to their base in the quarry over by Ravenstone.

I have had a Hedgehog in my garden for several years who appeared after I made a hole under my fence. He/she spends the day in the pile of logs and brash at the end of my garden and eats the food I put out most nights. This year this large adult has been joined by a youngster whom I am hoping will pile on enough weight to see it through the winter.

We all have our special places and memories wherever we live locally but how long will it all be here? Will humanity wake up in time to protect our natural heritage and ourselves into the bargain? Will we record enough to even know what we are losing? Will we care

enough to shout loud when progress threatens these places? Will we pass our love of all things wild onto the next generation? Only time will tell but I am sure our society and its members will continue to play their part in all this for the next fifty years.

Dormouse project Little Linford Wood

- Tony Wood

Back in the mid 1990's John Prince joined the Northampton Dormouse Group searching for evidence of dormice in the woods in that locality, but without success. So he continued inspecting a further six woods in our locality and believed that Little Linford Wood appeared to be ideal for the introduction of Dormice, that were then considered nationally scarce.

He contacted Dr Pat Morris, an expert and author on dormice, who inspected the wood and agreed it would be ideal for a reintroduction - but, first we had to prove there were no existing dormice in the wood. John then created the North Bucks Dormouse Group, made up with members of our Society and, following directions, we became 'nutters' that is to say collecting hazel and acorn nuts in the wood that showed signs of being eaten. These {2907} were all sent to the relevant authorities for inspection and we were later informed that none of the nuts indicated that dormice were present.

Members of the group then constructed 120 nest boxes and distributed them around the wood, and in June 1998 41 dormice, 16 pairs, 2 trios, and 3 singles, were delivered in nest boxes within 18 wire cages, and installed off the ground in various areas of the wood. The group members took turns visiting the cages every day to leave food, and after 10 days the top corners of the cages were opened so that the dormice could forage outside for food. We continued our daily visits to the cages until the middle of August, when we believed they had distributed into the woods. In September of that year

success, for we found 8 adults in our boxes and several nests included a total of 16 young.

Since 1998 the group has arranged box checks on a monthly basis between May and October and results have been encouraging, reaching a peak in 2004 when over 100 dormice were found in the boxes in September and October of that year. Sadly, since then numbers have decreased with no dormice now found in the main wood for over three years. However, boxes were installed in hedgerows bordering the M1 Motorway, some over a mile away from the wood, and since 2011 we have found dormice using them.

There is at present work on the M1 between Junction 13 and Junction 16 enabling a fourth lane, through smart motorways, and we are monitoring the progress to see how this may affect the dormice in the hedges alongside.



Dormouse © Kate Wyatt

Amphibians and Reptiles of Milton Keynes

- *Martin Kincaid*

When it comes to herptiles (the far from perfect collective noun for amphibians and reptiles) there is one species in our area which is very well represented. The Great Crested Newt, hated by developers everywhere, is prevalent in our area. Fully protected under UK and European law in recognition of nationwide population crashes, it remains fairly common in parts of south and central England and the eastern counties. Meta-populations are known from Tattenhoe, Great Linford, Middleton and several other parts of Milton Keynes and larger garden ponds often hold small populations. The Smooth Newt is more abundant and can be expected in most well vegetated ponds. The Palmate Newt is a species generally associated with slightly acid or neutral soils and ponds and therefore rare in our part of the country. However, this species has been recorded at one or two local ponds in recent years. Common Frogs and Common Toads are the only Aneurid (a collective for the Order *Anura*) species we have in Milton Keynes and whilst toads are still fairly ubiquitous there is some evidence that Common Frogs are declining with the loss and deterioration of some of their breeding ponds.

Of the native reptile species only one, the Grass Snake is common and widespread in Milton Keynes. They are usually – but not always – found reasonably close to water as amphibians form a large part of their diet. The densest populations locally are probably at Linford Lakes, Walton Lake and Tattenhoe. Although many people report sightings of adders it would appear that this species is now long extinct in Milton Keynes. In 2010, over 30 sites across MK were surveyed for reptiles for a full calendar year, in the hope of finding populations species other than Grass Snake.



Slow Worm © Martin Kincaid

Pleasingly, several small populations of Slow-worm were discovered, mostly in the Wolverton and Stony Stratford areas. In Milton Keynes, this species is most often found in railway embankments and associated brownfield habitat. Slow-worms are also found in

Olney and a few of the other outlying villages. The Common or Viviparous lizard is far from common in MK but small populations were discovered at Blue Bridge and also at the Blue Lagoon Local Nature Reserve near Bletchley. Quite why this species is so rare in Milton Keynes is a bit of a mystery as there would seem to be plenty of sights in the area which are suitable but do not support lizards.

Personally, the most surprising reptile sighting of mine was back in June 2014. Harry Appleyard, Carol Watts, Paul Manchester and myself were driving from Little

Linford Wood along Little Linford Lane when we saw a large snake crawl across the road in front of us. We quickly got out of the car and found, to our amazement, that it was an adult Corn Snake, and American species commonly kept as a pet in

this country. It was a beautiful specimen in good condition but obviously has no business being in our countryside. I doubt it would have survived for very long, particularly with such poor road sense.



Corn Snake © Harry Appleyard

Birdlife in and around MK- changes during the last 25 years

- Andy Harding – Buckinghamshire County Bird Recorder

Unlike some groups of fauna, there is no shortage of information about birds in the area. Throughout the period, two monthly bird bulletins, the North Bucks Bird Report and the Bucks Bird Club Monthly Bulletin, have detailed thousands of sightings, which have been summarised annually in the systematic list of the Bucks Bird Report, which, fortuitously, I have edited throughout.

There have been many changes. We have lost several species and others have become much scarcer. Conversely other species have arrived or become rather more common.

We have seen the first arrival date of a number of summer migrant species, such as Swallow and its fellows, House and Sand Martin,



House Martin © Andy Harding

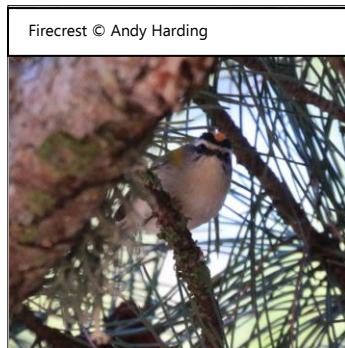
Sedge, Willow and several other Warblers creeping earlier. Swift and Common Tern are other good examples. These are the most obvious indicators of climatic change. National and regional trends are reflected in 'our' birds and, unfortunately, most are reductions. So we have lost Redstart, Wood Warbler, Tree Pipit and Woodcock as breeding birds from the nearby Brickhill Woods,

though all still occur as occasional migrants through the higher points of the city, such as Campbell Park and even the City Centre itself. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker now occurs at just a large handful of sites in Buckinghamshire, but no longer are any of those sites close to us. Corn Bunting is another species on the slide and the fields adjacent to Bletchley no longer have breeding birds.

Waterbirds are not exempt either. The extirpation of the Ruddy

Ducks programme has accounted for their absence in the last few years. On the other hand the crash in the number of wintering Pochard, reflected on our waters, is very worrying nationally, and not fully explicable. With a series of less severe winters a few other species of our wintering ducks, such as the beautiful Smew, have not had to flee the frozen Baltic and have become less frequent. Some much enjoyed passage migrants which have favoured our local waters still do so but in decreased numbers. Sizeable flocks of Kittiwakes, Little Gulls and Arctic and Black Terns, once highlights of spring passage, seem to be a thing of the past, but the habitat is certainly still there.

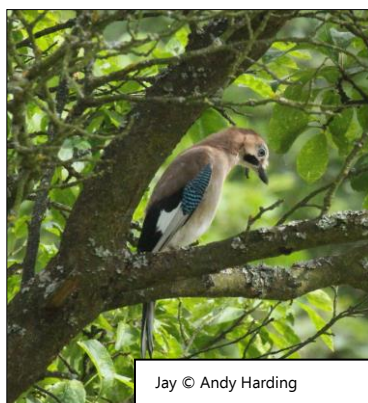
It is not all doom and gloom. Cetti's Warblers now have a strong foothold in the scrub around our lakes and gravel pits. These are accompanied by a much larger population of Reed Warblers, reflecting the large increase in the size of reedbeds. The beautiful and diminutive Firecrest has increased considerably in our woodland, so long as you can detect its high-pitched song. At the other end of the size scale, in 1992 a Little Egret would have been a major ornithological event, but numbers rose rapidly in the late 1990s culminating in what was possibly the first successful inland UK breeding of Little Egret at Linford Lakes NR in 2003, followed by Willen Lake in 2007. Both colonies have proved successful in every subsequent year. Great White Egret has also lost its rarity status and might well follow suit.



The reintroduction schemes of Red Kite in both in South Bucks and the further reaches of Northants have eventually spread to MK, with daily and often low-level sightings across the city. Without any human intervention, Common Buzzard has spread from the west in

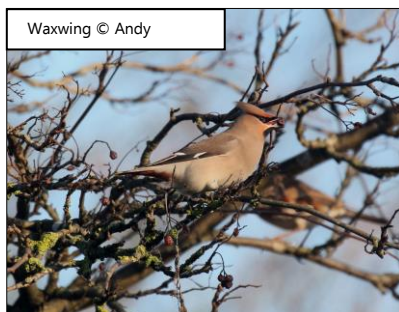
the period and become a common sight - it is now our commonest raptor. Following the same pattern, but seen rather less frequently, has been Raven. And we cannot forget Peregrines, which have nested at Stadium MK since 2015 and entertained the crowd at all the Dons matches. Will further pairs take up residence on the higher buildings in Central MK? Quite close by, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, more familiar on the coast, have taken to the roofs of Bletchley industrial estate buildings, and their ringing mating calls, as well as some juvenile birds, testify to their success. The even more familiar Black-Headed Gull has taken to nesting in numbers at several lakes in Bucks and there are signs they might become a fixture at our City waters.

The last example, while reflecting a national trend, also illustrates the provision of appropriate habitat. As the trees along the city's roads have both increased in number and maturity, so has the Jay population. Once only found in small numbers in the denser parts of Linford and Little Linford Woods and the adjacent Brickhills, this once persecuted species is a regular



flyover on the daily commute. The trees and bushes of the City Centre and some of the City's estates have in several recent winters provided a vast crop of berries for the beautiful Waxwing, an irruptive migrant which reaches us when the berry crop in Scandinavia fails. It is not just the keen birder who enjoys small, and occasionally large, flocks of this spectacular bird. While some planned aspects of the City have provided benefits, so have the unplanned bits: those which have awaited and still await development. In spring Wheatears and Whinchats have been found regularly in these fenced off undisturbed areas and even the more exotic Black Redstart and Hoopoe have put in appearances.

On the other hand, building a City has taken precedence over pieces of wild habitat and some previously fruitful areas have completely disappeared. The balancing lakes and gravel pits of the City are always a magnet to birdwatchers, where the muddy fringes can be as important as the water bodies themselves. In 1992, 22 species of waders were recorded in the year at Willen Lake, most seen on multiple occasions, but also including several county rarities, such as Curlew Sandpiper. That is no longer the case, since waters need to be sympathetically managed with wading birds in mind to produce such results. So, Caldecotte Lake, Linford Lakes, Stony Stratford Nature Reserve have also had their wader heydays following excavation, but as the vegetation encroaches, unmanaged, the habitat which waders require has largely disappeared. We shall see whether that pattern will be followed by our newest reserve, the Floodplain Forest Nature Reserve (aka Manor Farm at Old Wolverton). So, big changes, both positive and negative, with habitat changes in the City as important as national and regional trends. The drivers for the latter are not always clear.



Waxwing © Andy

What is clear, there is still much for the City's birdwatchers to see and discover!

Identifying rare flowers in beautiful locations

- Jennifer Mercer

When I was asked if I would write an article for this special 50th edition of our newsletter The Magpie I had to say 'Yes' but what topic?

I thought about what is the most enjoyable aspect of my engagement with natural history and I think it is ADDING A NEW WILDFLOWER TO MY LIFETIME LIST! Two stand out vividly in my memory although there are others. So here goes....

A golden wonder of Wicken Fen June 2018

On the last Sunday in June this year I was enjoying walking along the paths at Wicken Fen past reed beds and ditches feeling the intense sunshine on my back. To escape the heat I was wandering along the sides of one of the ditches when I spotted a cluster of golden yellow flowers on leafless reddish stems rising from the water some 5 or more metres away. I looked through my binoculars and the flowers looked like small versions of a balsam rather than an open buttercup shape. It took a bit of sleuthing to identify it as the Greater Bladderwort *Utricularia vulgaris* which is described as "rather local" in Simon Harrap's 'Wild flowers' (published 2013, page 349). He writes "It is a rootless free-floating carnivorous plant. In a single season up to 15,000 traps may be produced by each Greater Bladderwort plant, catching and digesting 23,000 minute crustaceans, larvae and worms. The animal component of the plant's diet may account for 50% of its biomass" There is more to learn in Harrap or on the internet about this lovely flower and its intriguing carnivorous lifestyle. What a rewarding plant to find at such a special site!

A blue stunner of Studland Heath August 2014

My second wild flower of note is the amazing Marsh Gentian *Gentiana pneumonanthe* for its intense blue colour which is a strong contrast to the wet and peaty black soil it inhabits.

Whilst on the MK Natural History field trip in Dorset we set out one day to walk through Studland Heath passing the 'Rocking Stone' on our left in search of scarce Sand Lizards and Smooth Snakes. But being a botanist, I was less interested in these scaly subjects so myself and a friend meandered off across some wet ground which dipped away from the path. We were rewarded by the stunning discovery of a sea of blue Marsh Gentians in full bloom growing out of the saturated soil in the hot sunshine.

Harrap describes them on page 196, as "Nationally Scarce. Very local on damp heathland. Flowers large, trumpet shaped, bright blue, striped with green on the outside and spotted with silvery-green inside"

What a thrill to find them! Although I do recall reptiles were located on our walk I have to confess I don't remember a thing about them! That is a task for another member of our society to write about



Harvest Mice © Kate Wyatt

Chicken of the Woods in the Ouzel Valley, Milton Keynes

- Justin Long

According to the oft-quoted 'Grete Herball', published way back in 1526, there are two kinds of fungi; "one maner is deedley and slayeth them that eateth them...and the other doeth not."

If only it were that simple.

Take this one for example – the Chicken of the Woods, or to use its scientific name *Laetiporus sulphureus*.*

This striking fungus can often be found in late spring and early summer, decorating the ageing willows that line the River Ouzel as it meanders north through Milton Keynes. It has been collected for the pot by some and is described as being similar to chicken in both taste and texture. There is however, as is so often the case with collecting fungi to eat, a significant complication.

The concern here isn't necessarily one of toxicity (although it has been suggested by some experts that even this fungus when collected from yew could be deadly), rather that a number of people, thought to be around 10% of the population, suffer a severe allergic reaction to it.

In fact even the experts have fallen foul of this mushroom's darker side...

Some years ago, at the launch of Michael Jordan's *Encyclopaedia of Fungi* some Chicken of the Woods that had been collected the day before was served as part of the lunchtime meal.

Around half an hour later, 6 out of the 60 journalists who attended the book launch were taken ill with vomiting, sweating, raised pulse - and were of course very frightened!

Fortunately, after a couple of hours, their symptoms subsided and there were no fatalities. Nevertheless this story does demonstrate the need to exercise due caution when it comes to consuming fungi. To add to all this is the possibility of confusion with other species such as Hen of the Woods *Grifola frondosa*, or the Giant Polypore *Meripilus giganteus* which may not be edible. In short then, with this species, as with many others, my advice would be to leave it where it grows and admire its beauty!



Chicken of the Woods © Justin Long

** It is always worth using both scientific names, and common (English) ones, where they exist. The common name is usually easier to remember, but it is also easier to get species mixed up. The scientific name though is unique to the specific organism so confusion over names is impossible. To put this into perspective, there is an example I often quote where a husband and wife I met on a fungus foray have the same name for different fungi, and different names for the same species! Suffice to say I politely declined an invitation to dinner...*

Butterflies in Milton Keynes

- *Martin Kincaid*

In the fifty years since the formation of Milton Keynes Natural History Society our butterfly fauna has changed dramatically. According to the charity Butterfly Conservation, three quarters of all UK butterfly species have declined since 1970 and many species which were common and widespread in the 60's and 70's are now much reduced or even locally extinct.

I much enjoyed talking to the late George Higgs about the butterflies he would see in the Whaddon and Shenley areas in his youth, but his tales of seeing Pearl Bordered Fritillaries and Wood Whites aplenty would make me green with envy. He was also used to seeing Silver Washed Fritillaries along the North Bucks Way, an insect which I used to make special trips to the Chilterns woods to see. Happily, this species at least has returned to Milton Keynes' woodlands in the past few years whereas all of the other fritillaries are absent.

I suppose I got hooked on butterflies from the age of eleven in the early 1980s. Coming from a car-less family, my butterfly excursions in those days were pretty much limited to Wolverton and Stony Stratford, but I was amazed at the variety I could find just in this small area. Since those days we have lost Dark Green Fritillary, Wood White and the Wall butterfly completely and once common species like Small Heath have all but disappeared. The Green Hairstreak retains a small relic population at Blue Lagoon Nature Reserve but will probably go extinct here with a lack of habitat management. The disappearance of the Wall butterfly is something we should not blame ourselves for – this species has disappeared mysteriously from much of inland England and is now very much a



Wall Butterfly © Martin Kincaid

coastal species. It used to thrive in dry, grassy wasteland areas of MK. Perhaps it will return one day as it has shown these strange boom-and-bust distribution patterns in the past.



Sad though these losses are, it is heartening to note that there have also been some gains in recent years. As mentioned already, the amazing national recovery of the Silver Washed Fritillary is an event that all naturalists should celebrate! One of our largest butterflies, these beautiful golden fritillaries can be seen visiting bramble flowers in just about all of the local woodlands from late June until early August each summer.

Although usually present in low numbers, they are unmistakable and we are now even starting to see the rare *Valezina* form of the female, which is a lovely bronze-green colour.

Perhaps even more exciting, since 2015 His Imperial Majesty, the Purple Emperor has condescended to visit us. There had been rumours of its presence for some time with the first confirmed sightings in Shenley Wood and along North Bucks Way in 2015. Janice Robertson and Harry Appleyard subsequently found it in Howe Park Wood and since then it has been confirmed at College Wood and Little Linford Wood among other locations. Happily, this most spectacular of butterflies seems to be bucking the general trend and is colonising new woodlands at a hitherto unknown rate.

The reasons for long term declines in our butterflies, moths and other insects are now well understood. Let us all hope that what remains of our wildflower areas can be fully protected and extended in the future so that these delightful insects can flourish. The hot, dry summer of 2018 has been like a time machine – giving us a glimpse of these insects in something like their former abundance. It would be great if this could become the norm once again.

Changes in Lepidoptera-Moths over the Past 25 Years

- Gordon Redford

There are 900 macro-moths in Great Britain and Ireland and in 2001 the perception that some of these and one in particular, the spectacular and well-known Garden Tiger Moth (see right) appeared to be disappearing started to ring alarm bells. As a result, in 2006, Butterfly Conservation (also 50 years old this year) in conjunction with Rothamsted Research Station produced and made public a report on The State of Britain's Larger Moths.



Rothamsted Research Station has operated since 1968 a nationwide network of moth traps as a part of their own insect population dynamics research. The data gathered from 1968-2002 showed that it was certainly not only the Garden Tiger that was feeling the pinch. Of the 337 larger moth species regularly caught in the traps, two thirds were declining, 80 species had declined by 70% or more and 20 of these by over 90%. The Garden Tiger had declined by 89%. In southern Britain three-quarters of moth species were tumbling in numbers. Their total decline since 1968 was estimated at 44% and in urban areas losses were at 50%.

A second report, The State of Britain's Larger Moths 2013, found that though the rates of decline of moths had tended to moderate a little since the previous report, the broad patterns of change in moth biodiversity were similar. My own garden records from 1995-to the present certainly shows the decline in numbers of moths. In 1996,

16,259 moths were recorded (with over 650 on one night in July) from 166 trapping nights. It is rare now to attract 200 moths in a night in the garden and in 2012, just 2,575 moths were recorded from 215 trapping nights. The records from the garden of George and Frances Higgs covering 1968-2012 showed similar declines. In contrast to this rather gloomy picture of overall moth decline and in some cases possible extinctions, this century has already recorded the arrival of over a 100 new species (macros and micros) for the first time in Britain. 27 moth species are considered to have colonized Britain since the year 2000 one of which, Clifden Nonpareil (see below) reached my small garden in Newport Pagnell on September 15th this year.

The causes of these changes are not fully understood. Habitat change due to urbanization, agricultural intensification, changing woodland management practices, light pollution and nutrient enrichment appear to have had negative impacts on moth populations. Climate change on the other hand seems to have both



Clifden Nonpareil © Gordon Redford

positive and negative effects. The future, unfortunately, looks like more of the same with HS2, expansion of airports and continuing demands for houses and infrastructure. Climate change may allow movement north for some species but how long before the pressure on land intensifies there as well?

Our Longest Meeting

- Frances Higgs

On the evening of Saturday May 5th 1990 twenty MKNHS members met at Howe Park Wood for an evening walk. I was not amongst that initial group as George and I arrived while the walk was in progress with the necessary kit for an all-night moth recording session.

With our kit duly chosen three methods of attracting moths were prepared:

- 1) A delicious mixture of dark brown sugar, black treacle, beer and a tot of rum was painted on the bark of selected trees. This method is known as 'sugaring'.
- 2) A sheet was spread out under a mercury vapour lamp.
- 3) An actinic light trap was placed well out of range of our mercury vapour lamp.

The group returned from the evening walk in the wood and seven people decided to join us for the night session.

It was a fine clear night, quite still, and with a three-quarter full moon showing. These are not ideal conditions for seeing quantities of moths.

We settled ourselves in a group around the sheet but made sure the light was able to shine out into the wood. As species arrived they were named, boxed and passed around for all to examine before being released. The following list is in order of appearance.

9.10pm 57F (13.8C) 32% humidity

Chinese Character

Water Carpet

Poplar Lutestring

Mottled Pug
White-shouldered House Moth
Pale Prominent
Brimstone Moth
Hebrew Character
Common Carpet
Clouded Silver
The Seraphim
Common Pug
Flame Shoulder
Small Phoenix
Dark Barred Twin Spot Carpet
Pale Tussock
Least Black Arches
Common Carpet
Waved Umber

10.30pm 54F

Scorched Wing
Purple Thorn
Broken-barred Carpet
Scalloped Hazel
Clouded Drab
Clouded Border
Swallow Prominent
Coxcomb Prominent
Chocolate Tip
The Engrailed

11.45pm 52F 53% humidity

Pebble Prominent
Garden Pebble
Common White Wave
Poplar Grey
Poplar Hawk Moth

Oak Tree Pug

1.30am

The Herald

Muslin Moth

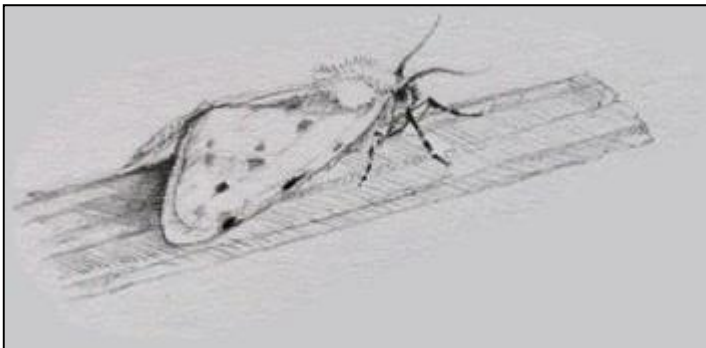
Brindled Beauty

The Streamer

We packed up at 4am (47F and 60% humidity). Nothing was seen at the sugar patches and the actinic trap contained only Hebrew Characters which was disappointing.

As the moth recording session ended Bill Pedley arrived with the sound recording apparatus ready for the dawn chorus. More members appeared and eventually fifteen of us were present at the next phase of the meeting. George and I stayed to hear the wood wake up but gave in to feelings of tiredness and went home at about 5am.

Nine hardy people stayed all night – George and Frances Higgs, Pauline Simms, Mike Killerby, George Mahoney, Chris Coppock, Jean and Peter Kent, Jean Varley and one other??



Ermine Moth © Tony Barker

The Future – *Lewis Dickinson, Chairman*

We have heard from some of our resident experts about what may be in store for some of our most fond species groups and as it has been noted it is always tricky to predict the future.

Looking back on "The First 25 Years" booklet it predicts a range of things such as: the venue of meetings will change with the growing membership, the Society's data gathering and recording will improve, the junior section that was discontinued would be revived in some format, and that the cornerstone of the Society's success was down to the friendship of the members and the flexibility for meeting and addressing new challenges and this will continue.

It is good to know then that the Society's venue had indeed changed since 1993 (at least once may I add), the Committee is working towards better data management, and that the Society members still have strong bonds of friendship and passion for the Society, supporting it come what may.

However some challenges remain including the levels of young people's membership within the society along with new challenges that have arisen such as wider diversity among membership, interest in participating in the committee/officers posts, and more widely the growth of Milton Keynes.

We as a Society are already working to address some of the challenges such as promoting ourselves more widely and working our way into the world of social media to tap into the wider demographics of Milton Keynes, also some of our members are actively inputting into planning consultations to ensure the natural history voice of MK is heard.

These challenges also provide opportunity for MKNHS. They give us a chance to look back on how far we have come and successful we have been in maintaining a group for natural history interest in Milton Keynes but also importantly give us a direction for the future



Cuckoo © Kate Wyatt

