



The Newsletter of the Milton Keynes Natural History Society

Officers and Committee

Officers	
President	Roy Maycock
Vice-President/Winter programme	Martin Kincaid
Chairman (Acting)	Joe Clinch
Secretary	Mervyn Dobbin
Treasurer	Linda Murphy

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Membership secretary	Di Parsons
Refreshments Rota	Colin Doherty
Sound Technician	Paul Lund
Summer programme	Mary Sarre
Non-committee	
Tetrad Project	Tony Wood
Magpie editor/Website Editor	Julie Lane
Webmaster	Rebecca Hiorns
Website Editor	Martin Ferns

Welcome to this bumper Spring edition of the Magpie and my thanks to all of you who have contributed such amazing articles! I won't say too much about the dreaded virus that is wrecking havoc with our human world but I very much hope you are all staying well and are managing to get some joy from being grounded in this beautiful weather. Those of us that have a garden or some where outside to visit near at hand are the lucky ones - it is such a beautiful time of the year and the added peace of normal life being on hold means one can actually hear the insects and birdsong in a way that is quite magical! My friend has an app that enables him to see information about the planes flying over us and last week he checked and there were only 6 commercial planes over the whole of the UK - imagine that!

Every cloud has a silver lining! This is a huge cloud but maybe, just maybe, our lives won't return to pre corona madness once we are back to normal. I think this really has the potential to be a big game changer and humanity's opportunity to reverse climate change - will we take it? Will we have learnt to slow down and value the simpler things in life like fresh air, walking, our wildlife and our beautiful countryside. My spring has been full of wildlife, notably, a couple of foxes foraging together in the nearby fields, four beautiful hares boxing, a grasshopper warbler reeling away in the scrub, a female goosander with 9 fluffy youngsters down at Olney Mill and best of all a nightingale singing in a nearby field this morning! I think it is so wonderful that despite the trauma that the humans of the world are going through the wildlife is carrying on oblivious and probably grateful for the peace they are experiencing. It is humbling to note that the world does not have to revolve around us.

Julie Lane



Message from our Acting Chairman Joe Clinch

The Society's Committee had a Zoom facilitated meeting on 22nd April (a new experience for us). Its first item of business was to report the reluctant resignation of Paul Lund as Chairman. Paul has been Deputy Chairman of the Committee since April 2018 and Chairman since September 2019. The Committee has thanked him warmly for his work on behalf of the Society in these roles and was pleased to know that he is able to continue as one of its members. This is the context in which the Committee has appointed me as Acting Chairman, to serve until the AGM can make a substantive appointment. The date of that is still uncertain but seems unlikely to be before the autumn. A summary of the other business of the Committee is being posted on the Society's website.

I have been a member of the Society for about 10 years (by chance I used to sit next to our President Roy Maycock at Milton Keynes City Orchestra concerts at which we were both season ticket holders and it was his encouragement that influenced me to join). I was Treasurer of the Society for just over three years standing down at the end of May 2019 and I have remained on the Committee since then. The Society's expertise and collegiality never cease to surprise me.

The past month or more has been quite unreal as we all have had to self isolate and limit our journeys outside the home to essential purchases and a daily walk or cycle trip. This coupled with the record sunshine has provided many opportunities for observing wild life in our local areas whether in our gardens, parks or other open areas. Our Magpie Editor Julie offers an optimistic message that perhaps this crisis will serve as a wake-up call to tackle climate change more seriously and to respect our natural world.

I have particularly enjoyed walks along the spring hedgerows with their succession of Yellow Plum, Blackthorn and Hawthorn blossom in the Calverton and Passenham area. Alas not a Yellow Hammer to be seen (regulars until a few years back) but still singing Skylarks immediately to the west of the new Fairfield development; a few late departing Fieldfares; Kestrel, Buzzard and Red Kite in the skies; Mistle Thrush flying away before you can get the binoculars on it; early arrival warblers singing; and Orange Tip butterflies everywhere. It really has been a glorious spring.

This leads me on to encourage you all to take up the challenge of contributing your own experiences of local wildlife this spring and on into the summer for the Society's website under the theme 'My wildlife excursions under lockdown'. And supporting photographs are always welcome. Sharing our experiences is one important way of keeping in touch with each other and as well as publicising our activities so that even more people can benefit from the pleasure of wildlife. Please send your contributions to webmaster@mknhs.org.uk

Finally the Committee will keep in touch with you about our future plans (mainly via the website) as the national position becomes clearer.

The Magpie has flown! Not quite! by Julie Lane

Over the past few years it has become apparent to those of us involved with the website and our newsletter the Magpie that there is quite a bit of overlap and also some muddying of the waters as to what content should be sent to which of the two forms of communication. Combine this with the work involved in collecting and collating the articles for both and it has been decided that we need to look at integrating the two forms of communication to maximise the quality of our output.

To meet this end this edition of the Magpie will be the last in its current form. In future we (the communications/editorial team) will concentrate on encouraging people to submit content for the website eg. interesting articles, local wildlife news and recent sightings of local wildlife. Then this will be posted on the website as before on a regular basis.

However we are also aware that there are quite a few of our members who do not have easy access to the internet and we of course must continue to cater for them. To this end we will also produce a twice-yearly set of printed articles or 'digest' of interesting content taken from the website that will continue to be called the Magpie (quite apt as Magpies do love a good collection of interesting objects!) This will be sent out to the members who are on our mailing list for printed communications.

This change will allow the editor of the Magpie to spend more time providing support/back up to the website editors when and where it is required.

We hope you agree that these changes are the right way to go forwards ensuring that the Society remains up-to-date in its methods of communication and continues to inspire its members to value and celebrate local wildlife.

State of Nature 2019: Feedback from Members by Mervyn Dobbin, Secretary

At the indoor meeting on 10 March and after the talk on the report *State of Nature 2019*, members were asked the question: 'What can we do when faced with the decline of species as reported in the *'State of Nature 2019'* and elsewhere?

This article summarises the variety and depth of responses that members gave on that evening. However, before setting out the summary I give the context within which the question was set on that evening.

For my talk, I started with a quote from Rachel Carson: 'One way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself *'What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?'*

The second question was of particular relevance to the talk as the findings in the *State of Nature 2019* made it very clear that over the last fifty years the picture in the UK was one of species decline. I showed one BTO graph which illustrated the drastic changes in the numbers of farmland birds. For example, since 1970, corn bunting, grey partridge, tree sparrow and turtle dove all showed declines of 90%. The feedback gathered from members shows that they are very concerned about the report's findings and that they have a variety of ideas and reflections, in response to the messages contained in the Report. Members' feedback can be divided into categories as follows:

Communications: Help people to value the environment by providing information to the local press on MKNHS activities and projects. Publicise the programme of evening indoor sessions more widely.

Indoor Programme: Focus more on climate change, species decline and how the losses affect people. Education for adults and younger people.

Personal Initiatives: Lifestyle choices - reduce meat consumption, buy organic, don't buy exotic foreign grown foods, reduce flights and car use, take more domestic holidays, reduce

individual consumption. Specific practical action - make gardens more wildlife friendly using nest boxes/bug hotels and don't use pesticides.

Recording: Carry out more recording of species to indicate the health/unwellness of our environment.

Organisation/Action: Support the Parks Trust and Wildlife Trusts especially BBOWT; encourage return to mixed farming and reduce monoculture; use one's vote to benefit the environment.

Planning System: Engage more with the planning system national and local: make comments on plans locally, for example argue for swift nest boxes in new developments; protest and lobby political representatives.

Feelings: Emphasise the importance of interconnectedness – humanity/nature. Share together as we are all in this together. Explain how loss of species affects people and places; share sadness and feelings of loss with others.

The MKNHS Committee will take on board the feedback which has been so readily given by members: from the 10 March indoor meeting and from the feedback contained in the Member Survey. The variety and depth of feedback received from members will help to guide the Committee in planning for the future.

Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) by Roy Maycock, President

Very close to where I live three trees-of-heaven have been planted. For several years I took little interest in them as I thought they were ash trees as these set seed freely. However more recently I realised my error and this year I took more interest.

The trees are native to China all tropical to the southern hemisphere. They can grow to some 30m high with the main trunk relatively short then it soon starts branching. The leaves can be quite large with few to many (7-25) paired leaflets with a single terminal one. Another important feature of the tree is its ease of fruiting with huge bunches of single seeds in a winged coat (achenes) hanging down from the ends of the branches somewhat like an ash. These fruits range from white through pinkish to red and look splendid with the sun shining gold on them. This year I have counted more than 30 saplings close by - probably all from last years seeds. If these grow to maturity they can be either male or female but of the three in Bletchley only one is a female. The name *Ailanthus* is derived from the Moluccan name for *ailante* for another species of this genus. Its vernacular name is 'sky tree' hence tree of heaven, because of its great height.

If you have seen any plants in Milton Keynes (or in Bucks generally) then please let me know (what, where, date and your name).



Postscript to Roys piece about the pyramidal orchids in the last edition of the Magpie

In the current edition of 'Plantlife' magazine there was a letter from Charles Flower who lives near Newbury in Berkshire.

Quote: "something out of the ordinary happened in 2019. In June an estimated 1000 plus pyramidal orchids appeared in one meadow."

Roy says he is trying to contact this person so that they can compare notes but he can't understand why there were also so many of the orchids in Milton Keynes in the same year. Let us see what this year will bring?

Early Pollinators - Article sent in by Mary Sarre

A new study, co-led by researchers in the US and China, has pushed back the first known evidence of insect flower pollination 99 million years ago, during the mid Cretaceous period. The elevation is based upon a newly discovered tumbling flower beetle, *Angimordella burmitina*, with pollen on its legs discovered deep inside a mine in northern Myanmar. The fossil, reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, pushes back the earliest documented instance of insect pollination by about 50 million years. Co-author, Professor David Dilcher, said: *"Its exceedingly rare to find a specimen where both insect and the pollen are preserved in a single fossil... Aside from the significance as earliest known direct evidence of insect pollination of flowering plants, this specimen perfectly illustrates the cooperative evolution of plants and animals during this time period, during which a true exposition of flowering plants occurred."*

[DOI.org/10.1073.pnas.191686116](https://doi.org/10.1073.pnas.191686116)

Ian Campbell, News Editor, *BBKA News*



Little Baldy *by Ann Strutton*

This bald robin has been noticeable in our neighbourhood for the past few weeks. We believe it to be a male from his general behaviour and we call him Little Baldy, although each neighbour has a different name for him. This is the second year that we have seen a bald robin and, as they may live for several years, it is most probably the same individual as last year.

Baldness is not uncommon in birds and may have a number of different causes: over preening, dietary deficiency, ring worm, hormone imbalance or feather lice. As some of these occur mainly in caged birds, it is likely that our robin has feather lice.

Feather lice are small biting insects of the order Phthiraptera. They are wingless and are adapted to feed on the keratin in feathers. Feather lice are very common in all birds and generally do not do very much harm and, as they are not blood sucking, they do not transmit disease. The lice are transmitted to the young in the nest during brooding. The lice have co-evolved with their hosts and are specific to the species which they infest.

A team at the University of Utah spent four years proving that feather lice in pigeons evolved over 60 generations to match the colour of their host when placed on black or white pigeons. They also proved that the pigeons were removing the lice by looking for them while preening. Of course, the birds cannot look at their own heads, hence this leads to baldness. Apparently, the researchers checked this result by carefully painting the backs of the lice with different colours.

Last year, scientists discovered feather lice and the associated damaged feathers in amber dating from 99 million years ago. These feathers were dating from the Cretaceous period and showed that even dinosaurs had feather lice. The dinosaurs meanwhile have evolved into birds but the lice have remained more or less unchanged.

Baldness in song birds is generally more common in the summer when they moult after breeding and some individuals may moult at an uneven rate. There is good news for Little Baldy though. He is likely to be able to grow more head feathers in the next few weeks, as the parasite load on his head is probably quite low at the moment, and, despite his looks, he has got himself a mate.



Painted Wings by Sue Hetherington

My first visit to a MKNHS indoor meeting was at the tail end of 2017 when I moved to the north of the county from the Aylesbury area. I was dimly aware of events on Saturday 21/7/18 and Saturday 4/5/19 entitled “The George Higgs Memorial Mothing Evening” led by Gordon Redford. I can’t recall why I didn’t attend in 2018 but in 2019 I was having my acute brush with sarcoidosis and was too ill to attend. I didn’t feel particularly sorry to miss them, having no idea who George Higgs was and not being particularly “into” moths and butterflies at the time. However, some subsequent talks and meetings led by Gordon Redford and Ayla Webb began to increase my interest.

Meanwhile, although I had moved slightly further away, I was continuing as a volunteer with the Bucks County Museum based in Aylesbury. I was deployed in the Natural History section, assisting the Keeper of Natural History called Mike Palmer. My work was at the Museum Resource Centre at Halton (with our President, Roy Maycock, for a while until he “retired”). Most of my work was on a computer application called ‘Modes’. Modes is the most popular collections software in UK museums and is the modern day equivalent of a box full of record cards recording everything about each object in the museum collection. I was set to work on the “Cecil Monks Diptera Collection” (gnats to you and me!). The task was to record every item in the collection onto Modes from scratch and it was a most time consuming task. I was just beginning to see some light at the end of the tunnel when I arrived on 3/3/20 to be told “drop everything with the Cecil Monks job, there is a more urgent task”. Mike told me that MK Museum has gained Arts Council accreditation and as a result they qualify to hold MK artifacts that until now have been held on their behalf by Aylesbury. Mike asked me to record the move on Modes for the HIGGS collection. A distant bell started ringing quietly in my head. Higgs? Hadn’t I heard that name before somewhere? Mike told me that yes, it was that same George Higgs associated with MKNHS. He let me look at some of the collection that would be going back to MK (see one tray below). To say it was utterly exquisite would be a huge understatement. He also showed me the Museum’s copy of the book “Painted Wings” containing memories of George including his Paintings of Moths and Butterflies which all came as a huge revelation to me. That evening was our club “Microscopy Evening” (when I went completely off piste and constructed a “Haynes” “Build Your Own Bat Detector” – with some much needed assistance from Paul Lund in particular, thanks Paul) and I was delighted to tell members who were there about developments. I hope the news filtered through to Frances.

Soon after that meeting, our world descended into the madness of the coronavirus pandemic. The 3rd of March was my last visit to either the Resource Centre or MKNHS and soon to be my last visit to anywhere within a very small radius of my home. I assume Mike will have finished off the Modes work himself but there is no question of the collection items being moved to MK “for the duration”. Sadly I imagine 2020 will be the first year not to see a George Higgs Memorial Mothing Evening. Maybe we can all try to do some mothing in our own little “lockdown” bubbles in tribute.



Moth Trapping Results January 1st- March 31st 2020 by Gordon Redford

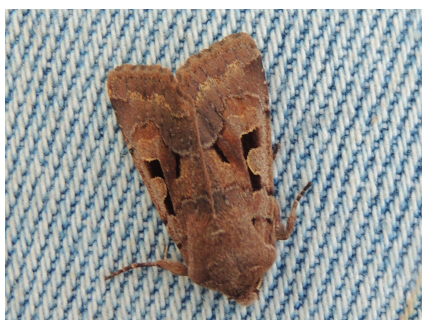
The first three months of the year are reckoned to be rather quiet for moths so much so that many mothers do not start putting their traps out till mid-March or even April. Over the past couple of years I have sometimes put a trap out in response to a warm spell or if lack of moth trapping withdrawal symptoms were getting the better of me.

This year, even with the Covid 19 restrictions, I have been able to moth almost every day either at my home in the garden in Newport Pagnell or at Linford Lakes Nature Reserve(LLNR) which is within walking distance from my home. At home there is a Robinson trap with a 125W Mercury vapour bulb and at LLNR a similar 125W Mercury vapour bulb on the permanent trap there as well as occasional use of Actinic and LED lit traps at various other locations there.

As of 31st March, these traps had yielded 27 species of moth from the 502 moths attracted to the lights. The 27 species comprised 6 micro-moths and 21 macro-moths. See the table below.

As this is the first time really that any intensive trapping has been done during this part of the year it is not easy to draw any conclusions. However, a colleague who has been trapping regularly through this period in his garden in the Aylesbury countryside, has said that over a 10 year period he averaged 23 species from an average catch of 561 moths. Our first quarter results then are not far off his averages.

339 moths of the 502 attracted are accounted for by 3 species, the triumvirate that dominate the early part of the year. These are Hebrew Character (156), Common Quaker(100) and Clouded Drab(83).



Wildlife around Milton Keynes Winter 2019-20 by Tony Wood

It may have been a mild winter locally but how we suffered from three storms, causing floods November, December and February. To top that we are now suffering from coronavirus that restricts access to some areas, and on top of this the Government requesting, we remain at home. But all is not lost – more of that later.

What news of the wildlife seen locally during the winter?

Mammals - Otters have been regularly observed at Linford Reserve with records of them over 5 separate months during winter, with one record of a possible mother and two young in February. In December an adult was seen on the stream behind the Discovery Centre, Bradwell, and possibly the same individual also seen in the pond at Bradwell Abbey. At Linford Reserve a mink was observed in November and volunteers found a harvest mouse in one of the holes of the new sand martin building whilst cleaning them out.

I have mentioned the dormouse project at Little Linford Wood and surrounding area many times and, although they appeared to have moved from the wood to surrounding hedgerows, the boxes are still cleaned out over winter. During this box check three pygmy shrews, two woodmice and, on the last check on March 11th, I was surprised to find a brown long-eared bat hanging from the lid in what appeared to be a torpid condition.

Owing to ash dieback in the wood BBOWT, who own the wood, arranged to clear the affected areas over winter. However, the Trust explain that the 'clearance may have a positive effect on wildlife with more light able to reach the woodland floor, encouraging flowering plants and insects to thrive, and benefiting birds and bats further up the food chain'.

Butterflies – The warmer weather at the end of March resulted in many records of species in members' gardens, particularly brimstone, comma, peacock and orange tip. The results of the national butterfly surveys indicated that records in 2019 were the best since 1997, with over half of UK species showing higher population levels than those of 2018.

Moths – In the last issue of our Magpie magazine I mentioned that an emperor Moth had laid its eggs in my moth trap and that I had nurtured caterpillars through to 9 eventually pupating. Well much to my surprise one female 'hatched' out early on the 18th March, and two more females early April. For more details on moth records see Gordon's article.

Birds – There have been very few reports of redwings and fieldfares this winter but in contrast we have received numerous records of goosander spread over our water ways. Also there have been an excess of magpies, particularly in my garden. Regularly 5-8 at a time but one morning in December I counted 11. How does the rhyme go? – One for sorrow, two for joy, etc. Does anyone know what 11 represents?

Another once rare bird seen locally was the Great White Egret, which has pleased birders with regular visits to Linford Reserve, and up to four at a time. At the same reserve there was a lone report of a bittern in flight being chased by a heron. During the last two months of the year there were reports of hawfinch, brambling, and Mediterranean Gull with one record of a hen harrier in flight in the Little Linford area. Unusual birds such as a bearded tit at Willen, a lesser spotted woodpecker at Little Linford Wood, and wood duck on the canal near the aqueduct were reported in January. In February the rare lesser spotted woodpecker was again seen at Little Linford Wood but this time as a pair, and in March birders were blessed with a single avocet at Willen Lake, and three ring-necked parakeets were reported in a garden in Wolverton.

By April the migrants arrived with reports of house martins, swallows, warblers, redshank, and oystercatchers – spring has arrived!

Back in 2010 members were invited to record species of wildlife seen within a tetrad that included their gardens. In that first-year members identified 1,172 species of flora and fauna

locally, with over 600 species in their gardens alone. So, if the lockdown still persists when this Magpie magazine is issued look no further than the mass of insects, birds, plants, etc that is in your garden.

Look, learn, record – but most of all enjoy.

Postscript:

Since Tonys article arrived lots has been happening. Harry has been busy, photographing a cuckoo near Tattenhoe and then he saw a Ring Ouzel and Hen Harrier both near Olney (how did I miss those!!). I expect we have all seen some great sightings so let us know via the website please.

*Paul Lund's beautiful photograph of a bumblebee **Bombus ruderatus**. And a joke!!!*



I photographed quite a lot of bees last year but the one I kept reading about in the Radio Times, but have never seen, is the Great British Sewing Bee!

Book Review *by Jenny Mercer*

CURLEW MOON by Mary Colwell (illustrated by Jessica Holm)

This is a book about the Curlew of the British Isles, their past, present and future. It is estimated that Great Britain and Ireland are currently estimated to hold one quarter of the world's breeding Eurasian curlew. The birds' breeding numbers have halved in the last 20 years, in the UK, and it is estimated that a 90% plus decline has occurred in Ireland.

“Curlew Moon” is an engaging narrative of a walk of some 500 miles in the summer of 2016.... through the middle lands, of Ireland, Wales and England, starting in Ireland in mid-April, and ending in Lincolnshire in the autumn. The author is Mary Colwell, a radio and TV producer and broadcaster, who funded “The Curlew Walk” with Crowd Funding.

The current life chances of the curlew are discussed as she walks through the diverse habitats they nest in – from lowland marshland and meadow to moorlands and lowland peat bogs – as well as the historical world they inhabited is described in this richly informed book.

There are attractive pen drawings of the birds and the landscapes they inhabit, by Jessica Holm.

She writes well about the landscapes she walks through on her own and in the company of local curlew “supporters” and occasionally she meets with field workers on projects funded to support curlew breeding habitat. Her use of the words of poets and writers, past and present, as much as the reporting of the country people and townsfolk whom she encounters, enabled me to recall childhood and more recent memories of the curlews I have seen on remote upland farmland and flooded meadows by the sea in Ireland. She evokes the call of the curlew over millennia using local dialect words for the bird and gives the meaning of place names, as she re-tells stories and myths with insight. The birds’ calls are explored in depth, and there is much to think about, “what if this iconic bird with its evocative calls were to disappear on my watch?”

For me her most meaningful discussion is of the Welsh word hiraeth. “There is no direct English equivalent, but something like pining, homesickness, yearning and unrequited love are close...it can be for a person, a place, or an experience of home”. The BBC, she writes, used the “bubbling calls of curlews” in a Radio 4 programme “From Mumbai to Machynlleth” which explored the relationship between Welsh verse and Urdu traditional love poetry, both developed from Sanskrit.

She introduces the reader to the Curlew River, an opera composed by Benjamin Britten based on a Japanese folk tale in which he uses curlew calls to evoke a river and landscape based on the River Sumida, which flows through Tokyo.

Her enthusiasm for the local initiatives by folk, like us in MK Natural History Society, should encourage us as she considered the locally inspired, albeit small scale, curlew supporters’ projects to be of considerable value. She discusses the difficulties of major conservation groups in managing the various areas of potential conflict between groups within their memberships. She encountered some interest groups with a narrow or single focus, such as hill walkers, rock climbers, grouse moor estate managers and their gamekeepers, peat extractors, wind turbine operators and river authorities. Evidence that curlew do not nest near wind turbines, reflects a new factor in the discussions taking place about how to enhance Curlew breeding outcomes. The author offers no easy solutions but is hopeful that curlews have a future in the British Isles.

As a postscript to this book review there is, since January this year, a new Curlew Action Charity set up by Mary Colwell, the book’s author.

Website www.curlewaction.org

Rating 4 out of 5 stars

Garden Flowers, Wild Flowers and Trees - a Website *by Alan Birkett*



I have been a member of the Society for about 10 years. I have an Engineering degree, a Biology degree and a PhD in Animal Behaviour. Over a ten year period I carried out research on the effect of black rhino, elephant and giraffe on savannah ecosystems in South Africa and Kenya and had several scientific papers published. Following these experiences I became convinced that many guides to trees and flowers were too complex for the average user and I set about developing a series of photographic guides in the form of apps, websites and books which would be easy to use but scientifically accurate.

To further this aim I have also developed a website which uses images and text from the photographic guides and attempts to create single source of information which is on-line and easily accessible by mobile phone, tablet or desktop computer. This site has been designed to provide information to gardeners, horticulture and biology students and anyone who enjoys looking at flowers and trees in the garden, countryside, local woodlands or urban areas. It explains how flowers work, how they have evolved and how they are now classified into families. Important families, such as Iris, Lily and Daffodil are illustrated. Botanical terms are explained using images and non-technical terms. It shows the difference between Broadleaf and Conifer trees and includes some simple keys, based on 12 characteristics such as leaf shape, buds, thorns, bark, catkins, cones, white flowers, and summer fruit, to aid identification. It uses close-up photographs to show features which botanists use in tree recognition.

It includes a News section on which I post weekly/monthly short articles about trees and flowers that I have seen in the city or the region.

If you are interested in having a look at this site [click on this link](#) and send me comments or ask me for more information.

My e-mail is alan@treeguideuk.co.uk

The website address is <https://www.treeguideuk.co.uk/> if the link above does not work