HIGHBURY PARK Friends

March 2014

Park Nature Notes

Bats in Highbury Park

With a tiny furry body and wings of fine skin bats are masters of the night air as they hunt for their prey by echo location. Bats are rarely seen by us as they keep different hours and are secretive but Highbury Park and its surroundings probably support a couple of species – common and soprano pipistrelles.

Bats rest in bat roosts which can be used for hibernation in the winter or for raising their babies in the spring. Roosts can be in tree holes, under loose bark, dense ivy etc. or in caves or buildings. Female bats give birth in the spring to a single baby (pup) using sperm they have saved from the previous autumn. Using echolocation and amazingly manoeuvrable flight, bats catch moths and other night-flying creatures and can eat up to 3000 insects in a single night.

Here in the UK, bats and their roosts are protected by law. Old trees may well hold bat roosts, so any works done to the tree should involve a bat survey. For more about bats in Birmingham and the Black Country see HPF Events Calendar for details of bat walks and go to www.brumbats.org.uk (E.P.)

Recent Events

The Landscaping of Highbury Park

In this engrossing and wonderfully illustrated lecture Phillada Ballard introduced us to Edward Milner (1819-1884) one of the most sought after landscape designers of his day. After an apprenticeship at Chatsworth he spent four years at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris then in 1858 set up in private practice designing both public parks (for example in Preston) and laying out the estates of men of means. He was employed by some of the wealthiest men of the day.

Phillada described his practice as “not very adventurous” but containing a number of elements which pleased his clients. Edward Milner evolved this style on a number of estates before arriving at Highbury. He was joined in his practice by his son H.E. Milner who wrote *The Art and Practice of Landscape Gardening* which outlined the approach to landscape design favoured by father and son. They went on to found the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Design, the first to offer courses in Landscape Gardening.

Commissioned by Joseph Chamberlain, the site presented to Edward Milner was a 25 acre greenfield site with no existing buildings. Edward’s design, submitted in 1879, featured a long drive to give the impression of a large estate, with planting around the edges of the estate to ensure privacy. The house would stand on a long terrace above sloping lawns. Glass houses and a kitchen a garden were planned near to the house, but shielded from view by planting. Long enclosed corridors led from the house to the orchid house, a main feature of the Highbury estate. (Joseph Chamberlain, inspired by his great interest in plants, later designed electric lighting for the orchid house.) A circular path would go round a pond with an island and a new lake with bridges also featured. Trees were to be

planted to make the estate look more mature and specimen trees were planted on mounds. There was a thatched summer house, and Joseph had a formal rose garden laid out.

In 1893 Joseph Chamberlain leased more land. The estate reached 70 acres at its fullest extent. In the following years the Chamberlain family members made their marks on the original design, building an Italian garden, with gates from Sienna, a pergola, a fountain, and seats surrounded by beech hedges. Steps down from this garden led to a rock garden. A Dutch garden, with paving and a great show of colour in the planting, delighted Mary Chamberlain. Traces of these gardens can still be seen on the east side of the park. A tea garden with statues stood in the area where the bee keepers now keep their hives. Austen Chamberlain introduced cows, hard to imagine them in the park now. The Highbury estate became one of the most elaborate Birmingham gardens of the period. It was famed for the view of the natural curves of the grounds from the house and of the house from the grounds. Alas subsequent planting obscured those views after the grounds became a public park.

To read more detail of this history and to see a wealth of illustrations visit the website, http://highburyparkfriends.org.uk/text/projects/historicsurvey/pages/images/HHLA_Page002.html (Christine Hardy)

Wildlife Walk March 2014

The ground was muddy following recent heavy rain and the skeletal forms of the deciduous trees reminded us it was still winter as we walked up to the old Henburys pond, but the sight of a bright orange small tortoiseshell butterfly dancing past indicated that spring was imminent. Out of the stillness we heard sudden shrieking. Two of our resident ring–necked parakeets flew overhead, delighting us with a flash of yellow-green plumage against a bright blue sky. Close to the old pond we watched two slate blue and buff nuthatches climbing up and down the trees, walking upside down on the branches and performing acrobatics.

Our wildlife guide Paul Anthony explained that winter visiting birds such as redwings, continental robins and blackbirds are still present in the park. Thrushes and long tailed tits are nesting, but chiffchaffs migrating from Africa have not yet arrived at Highbury Park. Many mammals are becoming increasingly urbanized. Foxes and badgers will have had a litter of young. A grey squirrel sat and watched us, unperturbed by our presence.

The park looked glorious with early pink blossom and carpets of purple, mauve and white crocus. We saw several bumble-bees and some honey-bees feeding hungrily on the nectar. As we descended the avenue from the old Italian Garden, we spotted a pair of goldcrests flitting in the beech tree branches. Our smallest native bird is easy to miss, being a drab olive green, with a flash of orange on its crown. We saw other small birds, long tailed, great and blue tits, gold finches and robins. Whilst great tits and blue tits prefer a habitat of broad leaved trees, coal tits and gold crests prefer the conifers. The park resonated with bird song. (Anne Gilbert)

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