

ALBURY ESTATE

Newlands Corner, Silent Pool & St. Martha's Hill

Ranger's Notes: Autumn-Winter 2011

These three sites are owned by the Albury Estate and managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust under an access agreement between the Estate and Surrey County Council. We manage these sites for informal access and recreation in keeping with the wildlife value of the surroundings.

Last autumn our herd of Belted Galloway cattle were put out to graze on the Albury Downs, and they are set to return this year. The cattle act like sensitive mowing machines, cropping the coarse grasses and woody species as they go, but unlike a mower they do not drop the cuttings back onto the land. Instead the nutrients are absorbed by the animals (a small percentage falls out the opposite end!) with the net result that the grassland is kept "poor"-perfect for wild flowers.

We hope to make some improvements to Newlands Corner car park this autumn in the form of clearer directional markings, disabled bays and bollards to prevent vehicles parking within pinch points and causing bottlenecks. Please do your utmost to ensure our disabled drivers can park in the intended bays and that gates are kept clear. Last January a blocked gate caused a delay in that the ranger had to take a detour in order to drive ambulance staff to an injured walker.

The new recycle bins have been up and running a few months now, and despite a couple of teething problems, they are being used. Please note we cannot recycle the polystyrene burger boxes or cups. We have asked the café to consider the use of recyclable packaging and hope to make progress in this area. You can help by requesting not to have a burger box, as many already do, or bring your own reusable camping mug to cut down on waste.

We often receive requests for memorial benches and whilst we have had to place a cap on the number in situ on all three sites, there are a small number close to the café which have not yet been dedicated. Please get in touch if you wish to purchase a replacement, but also bear in mind alternative options. One donor was generous enough to purchase two oak gates, complete with a plaque. The gates make a very real contribution to the protection of the site by keeping 4x4s off the downs and out of the woodland; a problem which plagued Newlands Corner last winter.

We have just embarked on a £50,000, 3-year Biffaward project which will see various ageing structures at Silent Pool repaired and replaced by local contractor Amenity Water Management Ltd. They will also carry out herbicide control of the highly invasive weed Australian Swamp Stonecrop which currently threatens to smother any native plants in Silent Pool itself, and is already advancing within Sherbourne Pond. This treatment will have the initial effect of killing off the weed and looking very unsightly, but once eradicated (it

may take several attempts to do this) we can set about restocking the ponds with native plants which will in turn attract a wide range of insects, birds and amphibians.

At the time of writing (October 2011) Silent Pool is looking somewhat empty. Being groundwater-fed it is reliant upon water within the chalk aquifer to keep it topped up, so its response to rainfall is somewhat delayed. In the short term the low level works to our advantage as it will allow the exposed weed to be sprayed as the chemical does not work in water, and it allows easier access to repair the old brick viewing platform. On a more serious note, the drop in water level may owe something to our thirst for water in the south east. The more we use, the more our water suppliers have to pump out of the ground. Next time you think of washing the car with a hosepipe or running the tap whilst cleaning your teeth, spare a thought for the life that lives in our ponds and rivers.

We are awaiting the installation of the relevant highways signs, but once in place, we will be installing a 2m width restriction at the Silent Pool car park entrance thanks to Rees Jeffreys Road Fund. The car park surface is unable to cope with the weight of HGVs, whilst a minority of truck drivers are blighting the area with fly tipping and litter whilst on overnight stops. The barriers should reduce such activity to a minimum.

The temporary low-level fencing adjacent to St. Martha's church walls seems to be having the desired effect in reducing trampling and, in time, allowing the wild plants to recover, but sadly the same cannot be said for the post and rail fence to the east of the church. In July our volunteers erected additional chicken wire fencing around the worst affected areas in order to allow the area to regenerate. It is arguably not the most beautiful site to be greeted with at the summit, but a necessary measure when faced with erosion across a wider and wider area.

The hill is being blighted by a handful of visitors who are not clearing up after their dogs. Many already bag and bin the waste, for which we, and other visitors no doubt, are very grateful. However, there are a minority who like to "bag and fling" with the result that several shrubs and trees are adorned with dog waste which will then take years to decompose within its plastic tomb! Much as we would like to install dog waste bins, the cost is prohibitive for a charity. The 3 bins at Newlands Corner are emptied three times a week at a cost of over £1,200 a year. We simply ask that you clear up after your dog and use either a public litter bin, dog waste bin or your own dustbin. Please do not leave it beside the notice boards. As the saying goes; "There's no such thing as the dog poo fairy!"

Subject to funds and the presence of buried services, we still hope to improve the drainage on the main track leading from Halfpenny Lane to the St. Martha's church. We are in discussion with Rights of Way and UK Power Networks regarding the best course of action in order to maintain car access to the church for older members of the congregation.

Be a responsible visitor: Take litter home and recycle wherever possible. Dog walkers are warmly welcomed, but please take away their mess! Not only is it highly unpleasant to step in (or strim), the nutrients enrich the site and affect the ecology off the site and encourage nettles to grow on the path-sides.

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