

Spring is so welcome this year. . . ,

A Good Thing in 2020: One of the good things to happen in 2020 was being able to hear the beauty and clarity of the dawn chorus, for once not drowned out by the intrusive human activities of air and road traffic. It's dawn chorus time again, and there are a couple of walks for you to join (pages 7/8).

Gardens came into their own in 2020: Our gardens are full of foreign plants, brought to us by the tenacity and bravery of early plant-hunters. One of these plants altered the wealth of our nation and changed our daily habits forever. A clue - it's related to our lovely camellia plants, in flower at the moment (pages 2/3).



The EEG Community Calendar: Dust off your camera skills. Local pics wanted for the 2022 calendar, deadline 30th June, the sales of which raise money in support of the Group's environmental work (page 5 for details).

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OUR MORNING 'CUPPA', and how it changed the world



Tea is our turn-to drink for comfort or in a crisis, and research suggests we use **61 billion tea bags a year**. All tea comes from **Camellia sinensis** (left). Differences between teas are down to variation in cultivars of the plant, growing conditions and production processes.

The story of our daily cuppa is probably unknown to most people, but you couldn't make it up. Tea brought great wealth to Britain and various individuals. A big player in the story was the East India Company, the first great multinational corporation, with its shameful part in plundering India and creating a multitude of opium addicts in China, bringing China to its knees by a two-way trade of opium and tea, with resultant Opium Wars. A central player in the narrative was Scots-born Robert Fortune, the famous plant-hunter, who travelled for several years in China's interior. Astonishingly, he was born into a poor family and was mostly self-educated, finally achieving a post at the prestigious Horticultural Society in Chiswick. He was first commissioned in 1843 by the Horticultural Society of London to undertake a 3-year plant-collecting expedition in China, there being an increased interest in gardening in Britain, and over 200 of our garden plants owe their existence to him.



Tea pickers in Assam (Assam tea is grown at sea level).

In 1848 he made his second journey to China, the only source of tea production, the secrets of which were obsessively guarded. The East India Company was willing to finance him. It was anxious to acquire tea plants and seeds, with a view to growing them in suitable mountainous areas of India, and thereby providing a source of wealth. He finally acquired plants and seeds, and enlisted Chinese tea gardeners, who had the knowledge for growing and processing tea.

He undertook a dangerous covert journey incognito as a Chinese mandarin, with wig and waist-length pigtail, and was assisted by Chinese servants and guides, without whom he could not have achieved his aims. During his travels, he was assaulted by bandits and pirates. Few westerners had explored deep into China's interior, like Fortune.

To learn more of Fortune's amazing journeys to China, read 'For All the Tea in China', by Sarah Rose.



Our 'nice' cup of tea is not so nice!

What about the billions of teabags in our landfill sites?

How complicated can trying to save the planet be? A teabag is just a harmless small cloth-like bag full of tea, enabling us to quickly make a cuppa and dispose of it in the bin. Wrong, not harmless: most of them contain plastic. (Now, loose tea in a pot, that's harmless!).

The tea industry is now looking at environmentally-friendly changes to the humble teabag, but it's not as simple as you might think. The following are possible options:

BIODEGRADABLE

Definition: capable of being decomposed by bacteria or other biological means. Designed to reduce volume in landfills, but may not benefit soil. **May need to be processed at a special facility.**

COMPOSTABLE

Definition: capable of being used as compost, which is a mixture of organic residues such as decomposed vegetation, used as a fertilizer. Requires organic materials, moisture, oxygen, and naturally-occurring bacteria. **Takes roughly 90 days to turn to compost.**

A young person, wishing to do something for the planet, might like to take on well-known tea retailers and write to them, challenging them on what steps they have taken to prevent plastic from their teabags spilling into our tips.

Useful sites - <https://greengirlgreenworld.com/2019/02/14/plastic-tea-bags/#.YGHJ1z8o9PZ> Very informative.
<https://www.tea.co.uk/tea-packaging-distribution-and-trading>



This house has a roof, but some don't. She is obviously house-proud, as she is renewing the base round her house with a mixture of mud and water.

Our cheap cup of tea comes at a price.

Tea picking work is very demanding, and mostly women do this job, working tirelessly under rain or hot, shining sun. Workers are paid according to the weight of tea they manage to pick.

There may not be toilets available in the tea gardens or in their homes.

Tea is big business in India, and Assam in particular, making owners rich, but young girls are lured to the big cities with promises of better money, only to be trafficked as slaves.



**Lonicera
fragrantissima**

Collected by **Robert Fortune** in China. Also known as Chinese Honeysuckle, Kiss-Me-At-The-Gate, and Sweet Breath of Spring.

Spot the bumble bee. The plant is attractive to early bumble bees, perhaps nest-searching queens. There were a couple on this bush in February.

On the subject of bees

The importance of our gardens: Recent research finds our town gardens produce enough nectar to feed thousands of bees a day. Turning a smallish



garden over completely to wildlife is a tricky business and may not produce the desired effect. December's *Newsletter* made the case that many garden flowers are very attractive to bees and other pollinators. However, a mixture of garden and wildflowers can work, and is not a cop-out.

An interesting thought is how diverse pollinators in another country may be visiting the same flower your local bee enjoys. Angel's Trumpet flowers (*Brugmansia*), which honeybees enjoyed in my garden during August (Dec issue), may be visited by bats and moths in South American countries (Photo by permission of www.ExoticEarthPlants.co.uk).

Hazards to our bees: Other research shows that exposure to the controversial pesticide **neonicotinoid**, likely to be found on a farm, caused sleep deprivation in bumble bees, and a loss of ability to remember and find where their food is. This pesticide is banned, but the UK and some EU countries have bent rules, allowing emergency use on sugar beet to counter a virus, and it may find its way into water courses. <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/bees-kill-pesticide-insect-sugar-neonic-b1784693.html>



A DINOSAUR IN YOUR GARDEN: April is the time of a great nature treat, the dawn chorus. The records of our two garden surveyors, Gillian and Margaret, for April last year included many of our favourite birds, who see our gardens as their grand estates, ignoring our legal boundaries, and finding fences, brick walls, trees and hedges great places for feeding from, perching on, singing from and nesting. Three birds they recorded are included in the British Library list for ‘The Top 10 British Birdsongs’:

the wren, for its size, one of the loudest songs
the robin, familiar in almost all gardens
the blackbird, a beautiful, mellow sound. Joseph Addison (1672-1719) wrote “I value my garden more for being full of blackbirds than of cherries, and very frankly give them fruit for their songs”.

To hear birdsong: choose the Earley Environmental Group website, then select **Birds** from opening page.

Why ‘A dinosaur in your garden’? After a huge debate, which began in Victorian times, it is now recognised that birds have evolved from feathered dinosaurs.

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/how-dinosaurs-evolved-into-birds.html>

Publication: *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs* by **Steve Brusatte**.

(Robin photo by EEG member, sourced from website)

EEG’s 2022 Community Calendar – Your Photos Welcome

Enthusiasm for the Earley Environmental Group’s 2021 Calendar was undiminished by the Covid-19 pandemic or any of the lockdowns. The Group’s second ‘Nature in Earley’ calendar sold almost 190 copies, raising £265 in support of the Group’s environmental work, and hopefully bringing pleasure to their owners each time they flip to the next month. The smaller format (A4 opening to A3) also seems to have been a success. The response from local photographers was equally enthusiastic, with a great many wonderful images sent in for consideration. Unfortunately, we could not include them all, but were able to include photographs by 16 of our local photographers.



We are now planning a 2022 calendar, for release in August, and welcome images from amateur photographers to again celebrate Earley’s natural environment, including images of Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve, our local parks and meadows, and the natural world found in our own gardens. Photos of woodland and lake scenes, wildflower beds and walkways, as well as pictures of Earley’s birds, animals, trees, flowers, fungi and insects will be welcome. Photos can have been taken specifically for this year’s calendar or have been taken in previous years.

The copyright of all selected images would remain with the photographer but, by providing the image for the calendar, the photographer would grant a perpetual licence to the EEG to feature the image in any of its publications. All images used will be credited to the photographer. The deadline for submission of images is **30th June, 2021**. Photographs should ideally be submitted in JPEG format and no larger than 5MB in file size.

Please send your photos with your name, image titles and contact e-mail address to **Bob Collis** at:

EEGphotocalendar@earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk

Bob Collis, Calendar Editor

Reading University student needs help. Hello! I am a Geography student at the University of Reading and I was wondering if any members could spare a few minutes to answer this survey on Reading's biodiversity? I would greatly appreciate it. [Eleni Hadjicosta](#)
Here is the link to the survey: <https://reading.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/reading-biodiversity-survey>

KEEPING YOU UP-TO-DATE – John Booth

SOAR Petition:

In a recent assessment, Wokingham Council recommended that the beautiful stretch of Thames Path at Kennet Mouth in East Reading should NOT be designated as protected Local Green Space, so Save Our Ancient Riverside have launched a petition to have the Kennet Mouth area designated as Local Green Space.

Petition: [Wokingham Borough Council: Designate the Thames Path at Kennet Mouth as Local Green Space Change.org.](#)

Environmental Recovery after Brexit – Environment Bill back to Parliament

Once again debate (and therefore enactment) of the Environment Bill has been delayed – this time put back at least until the autumn.

<https://www.sustainweb.org/news/feb21-environment-bill-delayed/>

Friends of the Earth commented “This delay is not the action of a government wanting to demonstrate world leadership on the environmental crisis. Ministers must get on with the urgent task of cutting pollution, improving biodiversity, and stemming the flow of plastic waste pouring into our environment.”

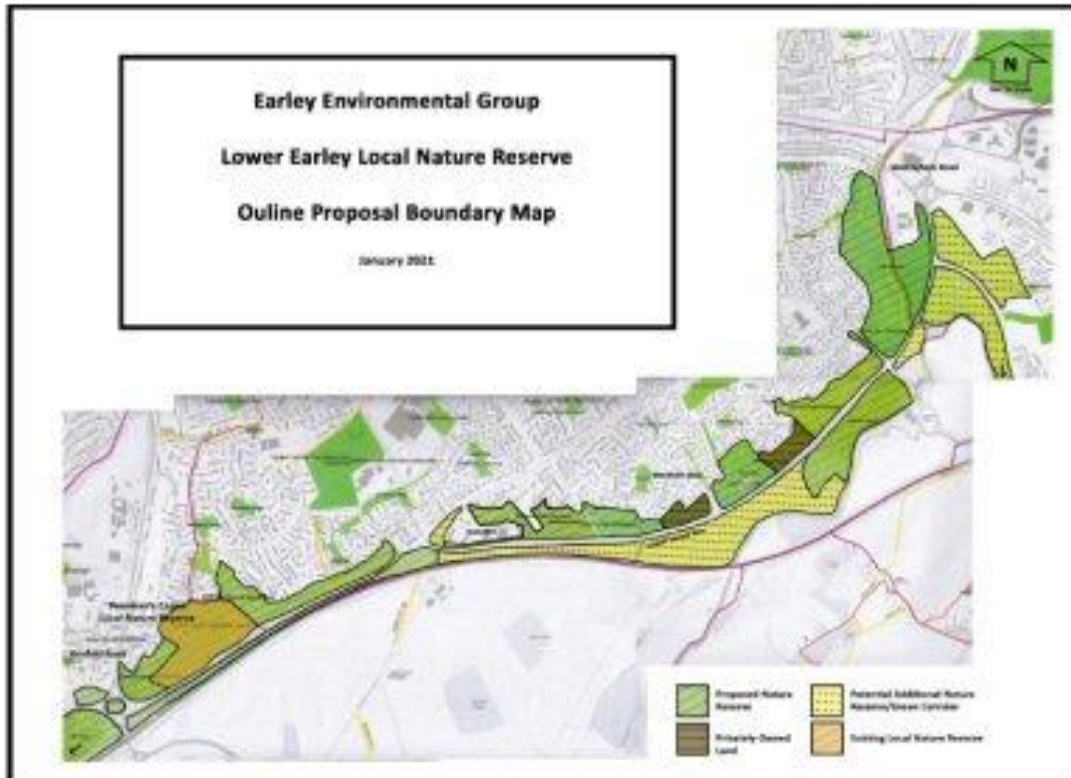
Renewed concerns about safety on smart motorways

Highways England figures show the Stopped Vehicle Detection (SVD) upgrade has so far only been installed on three sections, totalling 37 miles out of the 500-mile smart motorway network. The government promises that SVD radar technology (to detect drivers who break down in live lanes) will be rolled out across the entire network by the end of next year. It is not known whether this will be in place before the section near Reading opens.

NEWS FROM EARLEY:

LOCAL NATURE RESERVE IN LOWER EARLEY. Over the Autumn 2020 weeks of lockdown, a working party of EEG members put together a proposal for a local nature reserve in Lower Earley. This was presented to the Amenities & Leisure committee of Earley Town Council at the beginning of 2021, where it was received favourably. It was subsequently sent to Wokingham Borough Council for consideration and, hopefully, action. You can read [the proposal here](#), and we will be updating this article with progress over the coming months.

http://www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk/Environment/LocalGreenSpace/Lower_Earley_LNR_Proposal_Jan_2021.pdf (see map over).



NEWS FROM BEYOND EARLEY:

A study by Birmingham University has found that bringing trees, shrubs and lawns into prisons has a beneficial effect on inmates, who exhibited lower levels of self-harm and violence between themselves and staff. This is not surprising, since we have found the effects of visiting local green spaces a great boon during lockdown. The President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists said clean air and green spaces should be central to mental health services.

The charity Buglife is working on “insect highways” across the UK to help pollinators with food and shelter. Surviving populations are being marooned. Providing wildlife-friendly travel routes to new habitats is essential for maintaining populations. Members of the EEG are hoping to complete the mapping of a green corridor network for Earley when the current lockdown measures permit them to meet, and to have this adopted by Earley Town Council (see above).

February quote of the month from ‘Population Matters’ Supporters’ Update

“As I see it, humanity needs to reduce its impact on the Earth urgently, and there are three ways to achieve this: we can stop consuming so many resources, we can change our technology and we can reduce the growth of our population.” - Sir David Attenborough, Population Matters Patron

LOCAL FORTHCOMING EVENTS April – August 2021

Monday April 19th 7.30pm – 9.30pm [Compassion in Farming - by Zoom](#). A closer look at the current farming model with Helen Palmer. Email enquiries@earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk to be sent the link for this and other Zoom talks.

Saturday May 1st 5.30am [Dawn Chorus walk](#) Meet at the Interpretation Centre. Walk led by local bird experts Ken & Sarah White.

Tuesday May 11th 7.30 - 9.30pm [Saprocyclic beetles - by Zoom](#). Join local expert Jon Cole.

Saturday May 29th 5.30am [Dawn Chorus walk - a Wild about Reading event](#). Meet at the Interpretation Centre. A second opportunity to go on a walk led by local bird experts Ken & Sarah White.

29th May - 2nd June [Wild About Reading events](#). For details, see www.wildaboutrg.com.

July Big Bug Hunt. Date to be confirmed.

Earley Green Fair - August No decision yet whether this will go ahead.

Bits and Pieces

Don't forget: the Earley Environmental Group has a **Facebook** presence. We will be using this in addition to the main website and the newsletter as a way of keeping everyone up-to-date with our activities, and to let you know about upcoming events. Members are also welcome to post news stories or any photographs relevant to the group. Search for 'Earley Environmental Group' and we should pop up. Look forward to seeing you on there.

EASI (Earley Adopt-a-Street Initiative) would like more volunteers. Help keep your street clear of litter, everything provided. Contact Brian Hackett by phone (986 1115), or e-mail easilittergroup@gmail.com.

Can you offer active **help to EEG**? If so, phone 0118 962 0004, or go to the website <http://www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk>. We would welcome more member involvement. At the moment 'the few' help to keep EEG going.

EEG committee members can be found on www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk under Contacts. For **Wildlife Survey Forms**, go to the website, or phone Earley Town Council on 0118 986 8995. **Comments or contributions to the newsletter** to: sheila.crowson@ntlworld.com or 2 Reeds Avenue, Earley, RG6 5SR. We would welcome short contributions from members.

If you know someone who would like to join **EEG**, **membership forms** are available from Earley Town Council, 0118 986 8995, on the website under Downloads, or send an e-mail to the Membership Secretary, Liz Wild at liz@helva.plus.com. **Please inform Liz if you intend to change e-mail or address** at 50 Kenton Rd, Earley RG6 7LG, or e-mail her.

Erlegh Elfins and Earley Environmental Junior Group may soon be able to commence activities, and Charlotte Allchin will be updating interested participants in due course, 07771 605825.

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