

At the time of writing, at the end of March, we've just had a balmy week of unseasonably, but very welcome warm weather, yet with the prospect of snow by the end of the week! But spring is indubitably on its way: daffodils have followed on from the snowdrops, aconites and celandine, the Loddon lilies are out, the blackthorn and even the hawthorn is sprouting. (Ornamental trees are now in bloom in the Harris Garden, so that's my justification for a botanical close-up on the cover.) It won't be long before the bluebells carpet the woodland floor of Redhatch Copse and cowslips dot meadow by Oak Wood. The seasons unfold in constant evolution, and with Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve on our doorstep, we can enjoy the glories of their manifestation locally – just look at our 'Nature in Earley' calendar (p.2) for highlights. And all the more reason to secure protection from development of our local green spaces, by seeking designation and inclusion in WBC's plans: no more so than in the case of Laurel Park (pp.3-4), the subject of much recent campaigning.

With a change of editor, this issue of the newsletter brings some adjustments to its format, while maintaining elements of continuity with those that have gone before – the work of long-serving editor Sheila Crowson, who stepped down at the end of 2021 (p.2).

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## No Mow May

Earley Town Council is planning to observe Plantlife's No Mow May campaign in the maintenance of its land assets, allowing the natural growth of grass and wildflowers on selected sites throughout its estate and encouraging bees and butterflies. See [www.plantlife.org.uk](http://www.plantlife.org.uk) for details. The EGG is looking to extend this initiative and nominate some WBC-maintained verges for designation as wildflower verges too, in addition to seeking the protection of the orchids that grow in several public locations in Earley. Do let us know if you'd like to suggest a site for nomination.

## Committee News

Announcements from the AGM and latest committee meeting.

### The Committee 2022-2023

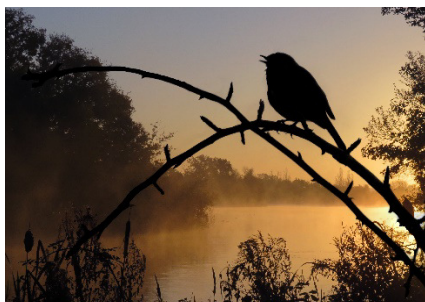
For the second year running, the Group's AGM was held via Zoom. The customary business of such meetings was conducted, reporting on activity in 2021, and a committee elected for the coming year. Sheila Crowson's decision to step down as editor of this newsletter prompted an offer from Edwin Trout to take on the role, creating a vacancy for chairman, which Bob Collis was willing to fill. With Sheila remaining on the committee without portfolio, and Edwin and Bob in their new roles, the committee was re-elected.

### Sheila Crowson

Sheila, who has edited the EEG Newsletter since its inception in 2006, preparing 58 issues over 15 years, was not present at the AGM to receive the public acknowledgement offered on that occasion, but on the day of the next committee meeting, was presented with an inscribed copy of the book on rewilding by Isabella Tree, as a 'thank you' for her outstanding service.

### Bob Collis

Bob, the Group's fourth chairman in 18 years, will be well known to members as the editor of our popular 'Nature in Earley' calendar (*see right*). He is an active participant in EASI and the Wednesday volunteers, and has been a leading voice in the Group's work on planning issues over the past two years. We wish him a successful tenure.



## Presentation to Sheila Crowson



Members of the committee assemble in Sheila's garden to present her with a copy of the rewilding book by Isabella Tree. (Photo: Bob Collis)

## EEG's Community Calendar Success – send in your photos for the next edition!

Earley Environmental Group's 2022 Calendar was a sell-out, contributing £317 to the Earley Environmental Group's funds and making a total of nearly £900 from sales of the three calendars produced so far. Thank you to all who have bought the calendars and, of course, to the many photographers who have submitted photographs.

We are extremely grateful to the Earley Town Council Help Shop, Huntley and Palmer Allotment Association and FAD at Silverdale Parade who sold calendars on our behalf. We are also grateful to St Nicolas Church (Earley) where we sold calendars at their Big Green Week Fair and to the church staff who kindly sold them in their reception area.

We are now planning a 2023 calendar for release in August. We welcome images from amateur photographers which capture 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. For the last calendar, we were able to squeeze in more images, with 18 photographers contributing overall, so it's worth having a go at getting your photo into the next edition!

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. (Composite image left: Louise Kemp and Cathy Garlick.) The deadline for submission of images is the **19th of June 2022**. 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 email address to Bob Collis at: [EEGphotocalendar@earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk](mailto:EEGphotocalendar@earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk)

Bob Collis, Calendar Editor

## Planning Matters

A round-up of developments that affect the land use and planning status of space in our area.

### Hall Farm/Loddon Valley Development Proposal

John Booth

As discussed in December newsletter this proposed 'Strategic Development Location' with 4,500 dwellings would extend into the countryside for about 2km south of Earley between Shinfield and Sindlesham. While the EEG has not taken a position on this, it is clear that it would have a significant local environmental impact.

A campaign group "Save Our Loddon Valley Environment at Hall Farm. (SOLVE Hall Farm)" has produced a leaflet summarising the issues: [https://www.green4grow.org/files/ugd/7f3f74\\_28859bf6dd0a4afb84ed99ed8e3eefb7.pdf](https://www.green4grow.org/files/ugd/7f3f74_28859bf6dd0a4afb84ed99ed8e3eefb7.pdf). They offer posters to download and put in windows and gardens and they request donations – see <https://www.green4grow.org/>

They also plan to take their "Alternative Vision for Hall Farm" to the University of Reading at Shinfield Road entrance to the Whiteknights campus at 12.00 on Saturday 30th April.

There will be a consultation into the 'Pre Submission' draft of Wokingham's Local Plan this summer but before then the local elections on 5th May are an opportunity to raise the issues with politicians and the media.

## Laurel Park 3G Pitch Reprieve

Bob Collis



**Wokingham Borough Council's proposal to build a 3G (third generation) artificial pitch on the lower field at Laurel Park has generated a great deal of concern from EEG members and local residents over recent months.**

Following intense opposition to the proposal from the EEG, MBOS (a local group of residents living in Marefield and neighbouring streets) and the Maiden Erlegh Residents Association (MERA), Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) has now dropped the proposal. In his letter to the EEG and other organisations, Cllr. John Halsall, WBC Leader, stated that "a review of a 3G pitch at Laurel Park indicates that this site is not suitable and therefore will not be progressed by this administration".

Under the proposal, a full-sized artificial turf pitch with fencing, lighting and, possibly, acoustic barriers would be built next to the Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve. In addition, improved access to the pitch via Marefield and additional car parking in the small field behind the children's play area would also be considered. The pitch, which would be part funded by the Football Foundation and by WBC, would be in operation for over 12 hours each day for seven days per week. Whilst the EEG would, in most cases, welcome additional sports facilities for Earley, locating an artificial pitch next to the Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve would not be appropriate.

In January, the EEG wrote to local Councillors urging them to drop the proposal; expressing its concern over the adverse impact of the proposal on the nature reserve and its wildlife, as well as over the loss from the development of the natural open green space provided by the two fields.

On 6<sup>th</sup> March the EEG joined MBOS and MERA in a rally at Laurel Park at which residents were invited to hear the concerns about the proposal and to give their own views. MBOS's John Bland set the scene for around 100 people attending the rally. The chairs of the EEG (myself) and MERA, Colin Mair, followed John with short speeches covering impacts of the pitch on the environment and residents. Three WBC Councillors; John Halsall, Pauline Jorgensen and Clive Jones, each then spoke favourably about dropping the proposal. We are grateful to Phil Marsh and Chris Elliot for their great work in setting up the MBOS campaign and organising the rally.

Whilst the Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve and Laurel Park are included as Local Green Spaces in WBC's current draft of the Local Plan Update, the small field is not. The EEG understands, however, that designating the nature reserve and all three fields as a single Local Green Space is under consideration by the Council. We would welcome this and will continue to monitor the situation on behalf of our members, aiming to protect the local natural environment and the tranquillity of the open space whenever and wherever it can.

## The Rally in Laurel Park

### Edwin Trout

Members of the Earley Environment Group were present at a rally held on 6 March in Laurel Park, initially intended as a protest against the proposal to build an artificial football pitch on the site, but in the event celebrating WBC's decision not to proceed with it.

John Bland of local residents' campaign group MBOS opened by casting back to March 2020 and the unforeseen impact of Covid on our freedoms, the loss of many of which was ameliorated by access to this oasis of green space. What a blessing it had been for the well-being of so many people, restricted to an hour's outdoor exercise, to be able to come here after a day cooped in the bedroom 'working from home'. Walkers, joggers, dog walkers, picnickers, ornithologists, moth- and bat-lovers – all sorts enjoyed it – even footballers at the weekend. And so John was horrified to hear, not so long ago, of plans to “cling film wrap” this space in Astroturf and acoustic fencing. In Britain, John contended, we often wait to see who else will do something. In this instance, the answer was quite a few. MBOS – Marefield, Barkby, Owston & Sibson – was formed by residents of the adjacent streets to resist the proposal and in doing so found common cause with MERA and the Earley Environmental Group. John was delighted they had been successful.

EEG chairman Bob Collis mounted the podium and picked up the theme of Laurel Park's use by such a variety of people: he celebrated the dog walkers, joggers, Frisbee throwers, and (as his own daughter had done) children learning to ride their bikes there. “Hands up the bat-lovers”, he called: a surprising number were raised. He acknowledged the tone of the rally was now more one of celebration than protest, but had that not been the case, the EEG had developed five lines of argument which he then summarised.

MERA – the Maiden Erlegh Residents' Association – was represented by Colin Mair. He explained that MERA had at first taken a neutral stance, aware that residents would have a spectrum of views, but keen to ensure that all were properly informed and consulted. In doing so it quickly became obvious that there was a strength of feeling against the proposals and it became impossible to remain on the fence. MERA had three classes of argument: the increase in traffic, the loss of amenity; and the environmental impact. The last had been addressed, so Colin expanded on the other two. It was never about denying footballers an improvement in facilities, he said, but the proposed pitch was in the wrong place.

In summing up, John Bland made reference to the worsening situation in Ukraine. Two years ago we lost our freedoms to a biological virus; now the Ukrainians are losing theirs to a political virus. Here we can assemble in protest, he asserted; here we can address our local politicians – our elected representatives – and in this matter they have listened. He then invited representatives of the several councillors present to say a few words.

Cllr Pauline Jorgensen (Conservative) acknowledged, with thanks, the involvement of residence, and undertook to look for solutions to the need for improved car parking. Cllr Clive Jones (Liberal Democrat) insisted on the need for proper consultation on such matters, which he said had been sadly lacking in this instance and threatens to be repeated in the new plans for Maiden Erlegh School. Cllr John Halsall, leader of Wokingham Borough Council and responsible for the decision not to proceed with the 3G pitch, reiterated the field was safe under his administration. The site was not suitable. Like John Bland, he ended by commenting on Ukraine, compared with whose troubles ours seemed trivial.



Photo: Anne Booth

Bob addressing a crowd of 100+

## Petition

The Earley Residents' discussion board on Facebook has a petition being run by Steve Bendall asking people to vote for or against the proposed 3G pitch at Laurel Park.

You might want to add your vote.

## Birds in Earley

Resident ornithologist Ray Reedman writes about some feathered visitors to Earley.



## Buzzards in Earley



I recorded this chap in Maiden Erleigh woods two weeks ago: it seemed to be consuming the remains of a woodpigeon, but there was not a lot left when I spotted it. It also hangs out in the Wilderness: we saw it there last Saturday. Last year there seemed to be a pair about that area. You sometimes see one up with the Red Kites. Another sign of changing times: you hardly saw a Buzzard east of the Downs 20 years ago. Another is often in the area just below the Uni Tech Park at Shinfield.

## Earley's Eagle is on the way back Ray Reedman

In 2011, I wrote a short piece for this magazine about an encounter Old Basing with a young White-tailed Eagle. That one was a vagrant youngster thought to have originated in Scandinavia.

Quite recently, though, another was seen near the lakes of the Finchampstead/Eversley area, but in 2022 this was one of our new neighbours, a bird that originates from the reintroduction into the Isle of Wight. You may be familiar with the scheme, since it has been covered by such programmes as South Today, Country File and Winter Watch. In brief, a series of young birds is being relocated there to imprint upon the location in the hope of re-establishing a breeding population on the South Coast.

It is extremely unlikely that any of those eagles will establish themselves in Berkshire, as the Red Kites have done, but back in Anglo-Saxon Britain the Erne, to use its old name, was native to the vast oak forests of this area, of which Windsor Forest is a remnant. It fished in natural lakes and rivers and found carrion in the forest. Earley itself derives its name from that eagle: the *Erne's Lea* was a settlement in a clearing in the eagle's domain.

So what is the relevance of that story to the inhabitants of modern RG6? Well I would imagine that the sight of a 'flying barn door', as the birds are often called, might just surprise a few of our residents. The more familiar Red Kites and Buzzards are puny by comparison. I tried to record the image of the Old Basing bird as it attracted the interest of a number of Buzzards. I noted, as the birds rose, that the eagle was 'an exclamation mark surrounded by full stops'. This is, after all, a bird with a 2.4 m (8ft) wingspan and with wings as broad as the body is long. And the white tail? They don't have those until they mature at about four years old.

So what are the chances of one appearing over us sometime soon? Fairly high, I would imagine. Another sighting occurred over Emmer Green last year and a youngster lingered for some time in Oxfordshire the year before that. Young White-tailed Eagles wander widely during their first few years and can turn up anywhere. The Isle of Wight is only 70 miles away, which is no great distance for a large bird. But, of course, they are now being seen more regularly along the South Coast, so keep your eyes skimmed next time you pop down the beach.

I don't want to enter here into a general discussion about whether birds of prey are 'good' or 'bad', or to argue the case for such reintroductions. The facts are best found on the websites of the agencies concerned, so I have offered a few links. The fictions will be found readily enough elsewhere, so take some of the claims against the idea with a big pinch of salt.

I for one am waiting for the day when Earley's eagle shows overhead, so eyes to the skies!

### Further reading

[www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/safeguarding-species/case-studies/white-tailed-eagle/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/safeguarding-species/case-studies/white-tailed-eagle/)

[www.roydennis.org/2021/09/02/white-tailed-eagles-successfully-returning-to-the-english-landscape/](http://www.roydennis.org/2021/09/02/white-tailed-eagles-successfully-returning-to-the-english-landscape/)

[www.forestryengland.uk/blog/white-tailed-eagle-reintroduction-isle-wight-august-2019](http://www.forestryengland.uk/blog/white-tailed-eagle-reintroduction-isle-wight-august-2019)

[www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/explore-rewilding/reintroductions-key-species/reintroductions-and-bringing-back-species](http://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/explore-rewilding/reintroductions-key-species/reintroductions-and-bringing-back-species)

## Maiden Erlegh LNR

What's happening on Maiden Erlegh Lake and nature reserve.

### Article now on website

Back in 1998, the Ranger service re-issued an extensive set of notes on aspects of the Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve, intended for use by students. After an introduction that comments on the geology and history of the site, it describes the reserve's constituent features: the woodlands, Maiden Erlegh Lake, the woodland pond and the brook that feeds it, and the grassland of Oak Wood Field. It notes the many uses made of it by residents for recreation. A further section on 'Conservation', as a Local Nature Reserve, considers woodland management, coppicing, and rhododendron and sycamore control, and ends with comments on fisheries management.

These notes – forwarded to the EEG by Rosemary Cook – have now been edited by Brian Hackett as an article for inclusion on our website, which also contains a downloadable version of the original. Well worth a read.

### Winter storms

We've had a quite a few storms this winter – three named storms in a week not so long ago. Although a lot of garden fences were damaged, fortunately there was little loss of trees this time. Before Christmas, however, one tree on the reserve was blown over by the wind. Falling at the foot of the meadow, it blocked the path until sawn into sections and cleared.

## The Mute Swan Edwin Trout

Maiden Erlegh has a long history of swans on the lake. I'm aware of three successive pairs in the years since the EEG was founded in 2005, the latest arriving in 2012 (though latterly – since 2018/19 – there has been no female). In recent months the solo male has looked stiff and his movements ponderous when out of the water, with much of his time spent resting on the bank. Showing signs of age perhaps? He was in one of the silt pockets on 20 November, stumping unevenly around on the bank, but on 4 December I noted: "no swan for a while". Talking to the water bailiffs later I heard he'd died, possibly of the bird flu that had carried off several others locally.



But cometh the New Year, cometh a new swan – well, a pair of swans on New Year's Eve. They weren't close together, but there were definitely two of them. They didn't stay for long and there was no sign of swans for a few weeks, but on 23 February I'm told there were three: two adults and a juvenile. The youngster soon left, but I've seen the adult pair continuously since 26 February. They are showing all the signs of staying: exploring the long-since used Swan Is, chasing the Canada geese with wings raised, and now nest building on the pontoon that fronts the reed bed. How much longer before the first cygnets in several years?



## Request for Volunteers

The three schools on Crescent Road – Alfred Sutton Primary, UTC and Maiden Erlegh Reading – in conjunction with Reading Borough Council, have introduced a road closure scheme to create healthier, safer routes to school for their pupils. Since 28th February 2022, part of Crescent Road has been closed for 45 minutes in the morning, 08:15 - 09:00, Monday to Friday, term time only.

The morning closures appear to have positive effect in terms of cutting traffic volumes, reducing emissions and improving air pollution levels. We are waiting for a survey by Reading University to provide further evidence of the impact of this trial on air pollution.

Meanwhile, we are keen to improve the environment for local children even further, by closing the road in the afternoon.

However, two Street Marshals are needed to close Crescent Road at each end, so there is now a campaign to recruit more volunteers to close the street between 14:45 - 15:30, Monday to Friday, during term time.

Are there any environmental group members who would like to volunteer, once or twice per week, afternoons (or mornings)?

- Help to lower traffic and air pollution to create healthy journeys to school for the local school children
- Improve personal health and well-being by undertaking a regular outdoor activity
- Meet like-minded, environmentally focused people

You'd be welcome to come and speak to volunteers during the morning closure, any day of the week to find out about the trial.

**Carol Richards**

Street Marshals Coordinator:

[cvrichards4@gmail.com](mailto:cvrichards4@gmail.com)

## Service to Earley Award



Charlotte Allchin: worthy recipient of the 'Service to Earley' award

## Toad Patrol

**Elaine Butler**

Every year EEG member Elaine Butler organises a 'toad patrol' in Farley Hill, to ensure safe passage for toads crossing either of two roads to reach the pond in which they spawn each spring, and to record the numbers moving. Maybe you attended the EEG evening meeting in January 2017 at which Elaine explained the scheme she coordinates locally for Frog Life and the Berkshire Reptile & Amphibian Group? Here she reports on this year's migration.

It's been a long patrol period, starting on 2 February: 51 days in all. We've had 1149 live toads, 90 dead and 18 frogs. The total of 1239 (live + dead toads) is the highest since 2013 (when there were 1271 toads), which is very gratifying, especially since we had 18 days with no toads at all and 12 with under 10. We did have four nights with over 100 live toads, and as many as 179 on one occasion. The previous maximum was 418 on one night in 2010, with a seasonal total of 2081 that year.



Photo: the first toad moved in 2022, by Lawrence

## EEG Programme

We list the Group's forthcoming walks and talks – fuller details are on the website.

### 2022 Programme Walks and Talks

Please see the website and public notice boards for further details and updates.

3 April  
**'HELP' Litter Pick**

1 May 5.30 am  
**Dawn Chorus walk** around  
MENR with Robert Godden.  
Meet: the Interpretation Centre

4 June  
**Queen's Jubilee picnic**

6 August  
**Earley Green Fair**

21-23 August  
**Wild About Reading**

2 September  
**Bat Walk**

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**Berkshire Ornithological Club**  
The BOC's programme includes presentations by a number of eminent ornithologists on a wide variety of birding subjects, and Bob Lyle tells us the Club would like to open these up to a wider audience. Zoom meetings are offered free of charge, but those attending meetings in person (usually at the University of Reading) are asked to make a small donation to help cover the cost of room hire.

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**Extinction Rebellion**  
For those who'd like to find out more about the work of Extinction Rebellion, the local group in Reading is holding several public meetings in the coming weeks. Details on Facebook and Twitter

## Active Conservation ...

### Wednesday Volunteers

The work of this active weekly group continues, with up to 23 volunteers currently on the books. Recent tasks include the planting of 2000 snowdrops on the reserve, clearing of brambles on the south bank of the lake and from within the Lakeside hedge, path maintenance, clearing of hazel and holly along the woodland path, and hedge laying.



### ... including litter picking

#### Welcome to EASI!

In January, members attending the EEG's AGM voted to affiliate the Earley Adopt-a-Street Initiative (EASI) to the EEG. EASI has over 300 members whose litter picking activities cover almost all of Earley's streets and open spaces. The two organisations have common interests and many of the EEG's members also belong to EASI. The affiliation will bring the two organisations closer together on future waste recycling and environmental projects and enable us to share facilities such as the Website. This year our two organisations will again join forces in support of the Town Council's 'Huge Earley Litter Picks' (H.E.L.P.) held in the Spring and Autumn.

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### Marefield Pond

Did you know that Marefield Pond, a small oasis tucked away behind the hedges on Rushey Way, is designated a Local Wildlife Site – a status second only to 'Site of Special Scientific Interest'. Its designation has recently been re-affirmed (and even enhanced) by the countywide committee that determines such matters.

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