friends of Petersfield Heath

A precious area where the natural environment and peoples' enjoyment go hand in hand

30th anniversary Newsletter

Autumn/Winter 2026

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1. Introduction

Richard Phillips, Secretary, Friends of Petersfield Heath

Welcome to this 30th Anniversary edition of the Newsletter of the Friends of Petersfield Heath! As a relative newcomer to the FoPH and its committee, it has been fascinating to research the origins of the organisation from the time when the Petersfield Golf Club's course extended across Sussex Road to the Heath as far as the present-day cricket pitch. The 'Little School by the Lake' was originally the clubhouse. Many thanks to Robin Hart for digging out the minutes of the very first meeting of the 'Heath Working Party' on 2nd April 1996 which resulted in the proposal to set up the Heath Steering Group, subsequently renamed the Friends of Petersfield Heath in 1998. Its remit was to act in an advisory capacity to Petersfield Town Council on matters relating to the implementation of the Heath Management Plan and by forming a 'volunteer labour group' who would support Petersfield Town Council on the ongoing management of the Heath, its ecosystem and its wildlife. This was prompted by the removal of the golf course from the Heath to become the smaller nine-hole course to the south of Sussex Road that still exists today, and the consequent need to manage the habitat.

The Newsletter continues with a selection of photos compiled by Jordan Bleach from the archive of the late, and much missed, former Chairman of FoPH, Richard Warton. These photos illustrate some of the many activities undertaken by the Heath Steering Group and Friends of Petersfield Heath volunteers over the past thirty years. This is followed by Jordan's summary of the current season activities of the volunteer working parties on the Heath. Other articles include an article by Alf Smallbone on the birds and butterflies seen on the Heath over the summer and into the autumn, a report on a very productive collaboration between the Friends of Petersfield Heath and the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust's 'Team Wilder' on a new long-term butterfly survey on the Heath, and two fascinating contributions from Robin Hart, a stalwart member of the committee of the Friends of Petersfield Heath since its original inception. The first draws attention to a Dawn Redwood tree on the Heath, just opposite the Plump Duck, a species which up until 1941 was believed to be extinct and, until 1964, thought to only exist in fossil form. The second addresses the intriguing question of why the leaves of certain trees change colour and eventually fall as the autumn proceeds.

2. Thirty years of the Friends of Petersfield Heath

Jordan Bleach, Vice-Chair & Work Party Leader, Friends of Petersfield Heath

Photos from archive of the late Richard Warton.



The very early days - some of the founding members of FoPH. From left to right: John Batstone, Ron Allen, Cllr. Dr Jean Stride, Alan Catchpole, Chris Jenner, Jenny Broadhead, Katie Pitt, David Scurfield, Robin Hart. Also visible in the photo is the first ever newly created Petersfield Heath management plan!



One of the early work parties showing a team of volunteers clearing scrub and saplings from the heath (showing that whilst times and people have changed, we are still doing the same things really!).



FoPH volunteers restoring the old Victorian railings near the Sussex Road car park.





One of the first deadhedges FoPH created as a barrier to prevent people unnecessarily cutting across the cricket club. Includes several members who have passed away including David Burstall, Les Bowden & John Palmer (in addition to Alf Smallbone who is still with us of course!).

A team of volunteers working on the deadhedge near the Little School car park. This deadhedge is now not in use as it has had a live hedgerow planted in front of it. Incidentally, this is also one of my first work parties with FoPH back in 2013 (I'm the short haired guy in the middle wearing a red shirt!).





A recent photo of our team enjoying a well-earned break and socialise. We really couldn't do what we do without our amazing volunteers!

3 Early-Season Work Party Summary 2026-2027

Jordan Bleach, Vice-Chair & Work Party Leader, Friends of Petersfield Heath

This season our dedicated team of volunteers have once again been out working every Sunday in all weathers from August to March undertaking a variety of conservation and habitat tasks for the maintenance and improvement of Petersfield Heath for the public and for wildlife!

The season started off in August with the first task being (as it always is!) the continuation of our bracken control programme. By clearing the bracken from the best heathland areas and open spaces of the site, we allow the heathland specific flora such as our heather species and the associated fauna such as Common Lizard (Zootoca vivipara) the open space required for them to flourish, whilst also maintaining access for the public.



Pictures of our team working on cutting and clearing the grass from the wildflower meadow creation area, and before and after pictures of the future wildflower site, previously swamped by bramble.

The beginning of the season continued with our team moving on to the task of maintaining and improving our wildflower meadow area. This area needs to be cut, and the arisings cleared every year to maintain low enough nutrient levels for the various wildflower species to flourish and outcompete the various dominant grass species. Having had our scythe mower repaired over the off-season, this task was done quickly and efficiently by our amazing volunteers! This season, we also cleared an area which has previously been very good for wildflowers but has become overgrown by bramble in the past few years in the hopes that exposing the seedbank will reinvigorate the area.



Before and after pictures of an area our dedicated volunteers cleared of bracken, as well as a photo of our team hard at work!

The most recent task the team has undertaken has been the annual clearing of the long drainage ditch running from the pond overflow all the way to Heath Road East. Clearing this now ensures that the water can flow once the rains come during the winter. This ensures a healthy lotic flowing habitat and prevents the waters from overflowing onto the nearby path preventing access.



Our volunteers clearing the ditch ready for winter.

A big thank you to all our amazing volunteers for all their work so far this season! I look forward to continuing to work with you all over the rest of the season! For anybody interested in volunteering, please visit petersfieldheath.org/work-parties or email vicechair.foph@outlook.com for further details.

4 Metasequoia glyptostroboides (Dawn Redwood)

Robin Hart, Petersfield Tree Warden, Author of the Petersfield Tree Trail, Co-author of Petersfield Biodiversity Action Plan & Committee Member, Friends of Petersfield Heath

Standing close to the water's edge about twenty strides from the Plump Duck Café on Petersfield Heath, you will observe the deciduous Dawn Redwood tree. This is the vernacular name for this species, which was believed to be extinct prior to 1941, but living specimens were discovered which began a scientific trail to authenticate its living being and ultimately named *Metasequoia glyptostroboides.*

Professor of Forest Management Kan Duo (Toh Kan, 1903-1961) of the National Central University, Chongqing, (formerly Chungking) during 1941, whilst surveying forests in Sichuan

and Hubei provinces, discovered huge living specimens of a tree which was unknown to him at that time. Unfortunately, he did not attempt to publish his findings to identify the species immediately. His discovery formed part of a local shrine in a most mountainous area of Central South China, where neighbouring villagers called it 水杉 (*Shuǐshān* or "water fir").



Metasequoia glyptstroboides
Dawn Redwood
Opposite the Plump Duck and Children's Playground, Petersfield Heath

In 1943 another forester from the National Bureau of Forest Research in the same city as Tow Kan, namely, Wang Zhan (Chan Wang, 1911-2000) collected unidentified material from a tree in Lichuan County, Hubei province. These samples are believed to be from the same grove of trees as Kan discovered two years earlier. The samples were determined to belong to a species yet unknown to botanical science, but WW2 deferred further study.

The taxonomist and paleobotanist Dr. Hu Xiansu (Hsen-Hsu Hu, 1894-1968) collaborated with Kan and Wang on their new discovery soon after WW2. Many years earlier, in December 1912, he had enrolled at the University of California, now Berkeley, to study for a BSc. and returned to the USA in 1923 to study botany at Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University where, in 1925, where he received his Science Doctorate.

Concurrently Dr. Shigeru Miki (1901-1974) was an eminent Japanese paleobotanist working at Kyoto University studying Mesozoic Era fossils belonging to the Cupressaceous family. It was while studying fossil samples in 1941, none of which were less than 150 million years old, he recognized a divergent leaf form. He realized he had discovered a new genus which was analogous with the genus *Sequoia* from North America. Along with Hu and Wan-Chun Cheng

(1908-1987) both renowned botanists and specialising in taxonomy, plus the two who had discovered the mystery tree, Kan and Wang, the group took the Greek word *meta* (μετά) meaning with or companionship or transformation, and prefixed *sequoia* to form the genus *Metasequoia*. Following on from the genus the name of the species was derived from its similarity to a rare tree *Glyptostrobus pensilis* the Chinese swamp cypress.

In 1946 it was announced to the scientific world that this species was alive and living in Hubei Province. This news caused a rush for scientists and researchers to collect seed and specimens. The Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University funded an expedition to gather seed in 1948. This visit collected a little over a kilogram of the tiny lentil-size seed, which was distributed to arboreta around the world, including the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew London and RBG Edinburgh.

During 1985, while a Canadian Geological Survey of the far north of Axel was being carried out on Heiberg Island in the region of 80° North Latitude, the team's helicopter pilot, Paul Tudge, observed abnormal turrets of ice below his flight path. On returning to examine this abnormality the geologists discovered ice encased tree stumps. On the result of dendrology examination Dawn Redwood was discovered along with larch, pine, hemlock, spruce and ginkgo all belonging to the phylum gymnosperm, plus birch, alder, hickory and oak appertaining to the phylum angiosperm. These species were growing during the Middle Eocene Epoch on the slopes of the Geodetic Hills of Axel Heiberg which date 40 to 45 million years ago (mya). The real surprise was that these trees were neither coal nor fossils, but mummified wood, only darkened by age and still recognisable as wood enabling identification of the species growing at this latitude. This is excellent evidence of a climate which was much warmer during the time of the Eocene Epoch (56-33.9 mya) than the frigid conditions which are being experienced now. Our planet was much warmer then with forests able to grow in terrain extending close to both poles.

Returning to Petersfield Heath and the Dawn Redwood planted close to the edge of the pond, this tree was measured on 25th May 2026 and has now attained a height of 16.89 m. It has a canopy drip zone of 102 square metres with a trunk diameter at breast height of 0.73 m. It is very vulnerable to root compression and wear from foot fall and will inevitably suffer from root damage. A plan is in progress to safeguard its root system by reducing the foot fall and the

attrition to the ground under the canopy of the tree, as well as the terrain where there is an immense usage throughout the amenity area of the recreation ground.

5 Phew, What a Scorcher!

Alf Smallbone, Committee Member, Friends of Petersfield Heath

Indeed, it was and the effect of the heat is still obvious with the water level of the pond close to its lowest ever. It will require prolonged heavy rain to restore the level to normality. The wildfowl seemed to cope well with the high temperatures showing no undue stress. All the species on the pond raised broods with varying degrees of success. Perhaps the most unusual was the Greylag Goose. It nested on what I call the Magpie island and sat there for what seemed like 2 months and finally hatched one gosling. It must have perished shortly after as I never saw it again.



Common Sandpiper

All the expected summer migrants were seen, plus the return after a few years absence at the heath, of the Whitethroat. I heard it sing again in late June, so it obviously remained here. Hopefully, it found a mate and bred. As the summer came to an end the lone Black Swan which had been present since March took off leaving the Bar headed Goose as the ponds only exotic. It was by no means the only goose at the pond as around 500 – 600 Egyptian and Canada geese were either here or grazing on Heath Farm. By September, the water level was well down, exposing plenty of mud and sand, ideal for attracting passing migrants. One or two Common Sandpipers appeared as usual, but this time were joined by a Snipe. This is my first record for Snipe at the Heath although back in the 80s and 90s I regularly saw them during the wintertime along with Lapwing and Golden Plover on Heath Farm. Alas no longer.



Grey Wagtail

Winter ducks appeared at this time with Tufted Duck, Shoveler, Teal and Wigeon noted. Almost all of these remained for a day or so and moved on. Other species at this time have been Great crested Grebe, Little Grebe (still here as I write these few words), Cormorant, Little Egret, Grey Heron and Grey Wagtail.

Out on the Heath most flowers were burnt to a crisp, the Ling and Devilsbit Scabious both suffered badly. Despite the shortage of nectar there were a good number of butterflies to be seen during June and July. Exceptionally for the Heath I noted double figure counts for the Holly Blue, Large Skipper and Small Copper. Come late August and September the Clouded Yellow was seen in ones and twos. This insect is a migrant from the Mediterranean and in most years is not recorded here. The Wildflower plot by the Sussex Road car park produced a couple of new plants this year with Ragged Robin and Pyramidal Orchid seen.

6 Leaf Colour

Robin Hart, Petersfield Tree Warden, Author of the Petersfield Tree Trail, Co-author of Petersfield Biodiversity Action Plan & Committee Member, Friends of Petersfield Heath



Fraxinus angustifolia subspecies oxycarpa Raywood Ash

One of the most obvious natural indications of the of the annual shift from summer to autumn is the changing colours of the leaves of many of our trees to a huge variety of shades, hues and tints. But why and how does this happen, and why do the leaves eventually drop off deciduous trees? Bear in mind that not all trees lose their leaves every autumnal season. Many species, such as the yew, juniper, pine, holly and holm oak, are evergreen and do not behave in this way. However, a significant number are

deciduous and undergo leaf loss during the winter months. Prior to this autumnal leaf drop, we have the immense pleasure of witnessing the spectacular exhibition of a fantastic array of tones which are so characteristic of the autumn fall. You may ask what is happening inside the leaf structure to determine the colour of the leaves? The colours are a result of the presence of a blend of pigments in the chemical structure of the plant cells. These compounds absorb certain wavelengths in the colour spectrum of white light but reflect others back for us to see. It is these reflected rays of light that determine the colours that we see.



Liquidambar orientalis
Oriental sweet gum

The most widespread pigment in the leaves of plants is chlorophyll, the main pigment in the intricate process of photosynthesis. This is a process by which plants produce sugars from the water drawn by the root system, carbon dioxide drawn from the air and energy drawn from sunlight. The air enters the plant by diffusion through stomata, which are microscopic pores on the underside of the leaf, while the energy from sunlight reaches the upper side. Chlorophyll absorbs wavelengths from both ends of the visible spectrum of light but reflects back the wavelengths of the central section of the spectrum, which is why chlorophyll appears green to us.



Taxodium distichum
Swamp cypress

During the summer months of long days of light and warmth the leaves are actively producing a lot of chlorophyll, which is why we see a high preponderance of various shades of green. In addition to chlorophyll there are other organic pigments which absorb light of different wavelengths, resulting in the appearance of other colours. These pigments are carotenoids which produce yellow compounds known as xanthophylls; the orange and red are carotenes which all occur in the leaf structure.



Nyssa sylvatica
Black tupelo

There is one particular carotenoid named anthocyanin which is produced when an excess of sugars occurs towards the end of the growing season. This contributes to the vibrant reds and purples we see chiefly in maples. One likely premise for the latent production of anthocynannin is that it is an antioxidant which accumulates in the leaf to prevent cell damage while the chlorophyll is being converted. Since they absorb radiation in the UV spectrum this can act as a screen against damage. This still remains a topic of active research. However, with the onset of autumn, reduced sunlight and cooler nights, this activates chlorophyll to be reabsorbed by compounds breaking down to simpler and useful nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous and then stored into the parenchyma cells of the xylem in the branches and trunk ready for using in new growth in the next growing season. Having lost the chlorophyll this reveals the other organic pigments and hence the display of a variety of colours.

Once the leaves have released oxygen on converting gases and given all the nutrients to the tree and stopped performing the main function of producing sugars by photosynthesis, they will drop off deciduous trees, through a process known as abscission. Leaves are secured by a layer called the middle lamella which holds cells together at this abscission zone. A controlling factor is the reduction in daylight which causes plant hormones auxin and ethylene to come into action. When the middle lamellae cells become exposed to ethylene, enzymes are created which degrade the middle lamellae causing the leaves to become separated and to fall.



Gleditsia triacanthos
Sunburst
Honey locust

Many of us who admire the wonders of nature's colour performance take this display for granted, but on reading into the science of the complex process which has been occurring long before mankind was around to comprehend what was going on, it is clear that it is still not fully understood. So, there you have it in a nutshell but just enjoy the wonders of nature's painting whenever it comes round!

7 A Flutter of Success on Petersfield Heath

Jordan Bleach, Vice-Chair & Work Party Leader, Friends of Petersfield Heath

This summer, Friends of Petersfield Heath teamed up with Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust's Team Wilder to begin a new long-term butterfly survey. After training with the Trust's Steve Bolton, volunteers walked a fixed route each week, recording butterflies across woodland edge, open water, amenity grassland, heathland, hedgerow and wild grassland. Their findings will help show which habitats best support butterflies, and where future improvements could have the greatest impact.

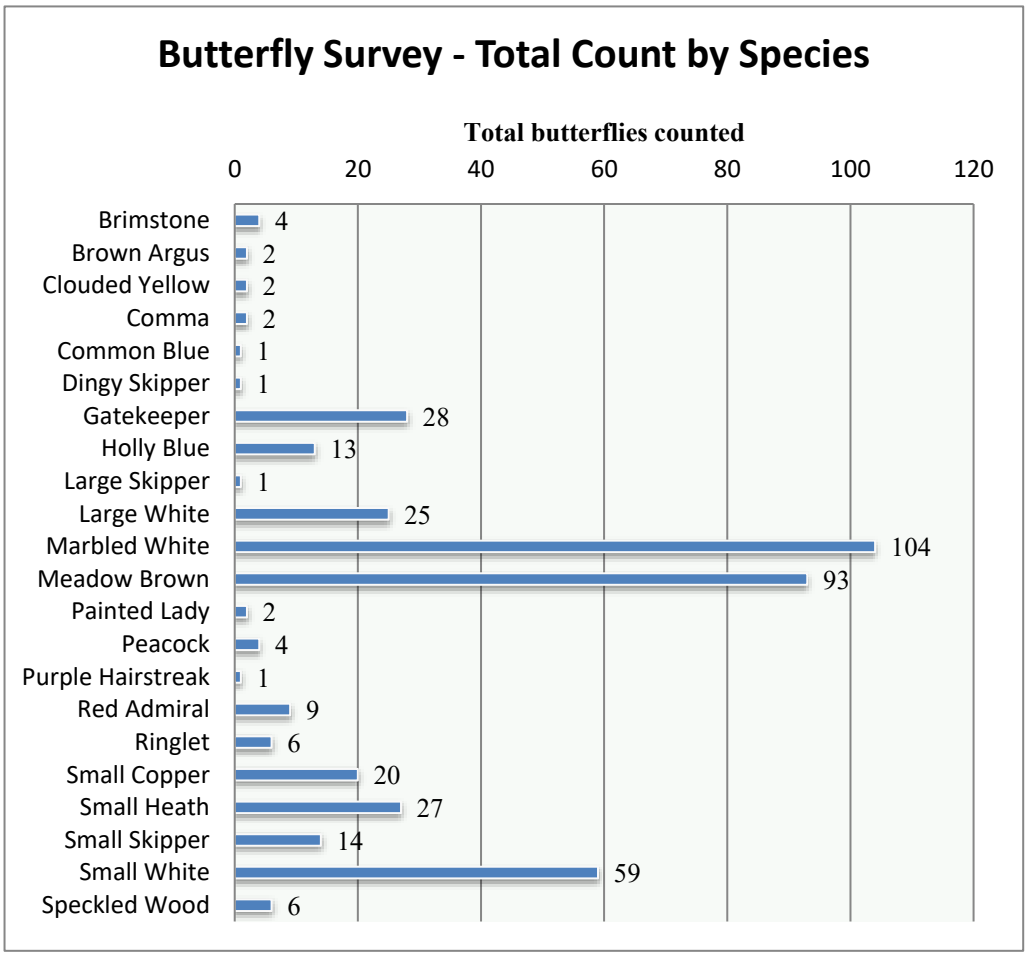


First-season success

During the first summer of monitoring, volunteers counted **424 butterflies** from **22 species**. The results provide an encouraging snapshot of butterfly life on the Heath and an important baseline for future surveys.

Species spotted: Brimstone, Brown Argus, Clouded Yellow, Comma, Common Blue, Dingy Skipper, Gatekeeper, Holly Blue, Large Skipper, Large White, Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Painted Lady, Peacock, Purple Hairstreak, Red Admiral, Ringlet, Small Copper, Small Heath, Small Skipper, Small White and Speckled Wood**.**

Across the season: the graph below shows how weekly butterfly activity rose and fell through the summer.



At a glance

Top species: Marbled White led the count with 104, followed by Meadow Brown with 93 and Small White with 59. Together, these three species accounted for 60.4% of all observations.

Busiest days: volunteers counted 145 butterflies on 27 June and 85 on 29 June. Those two visits contributed 54.5% of the season's total.

Greatest variety: 12 species were recorded on 7 July, when the total count reached 43 butterflies.

Most consistent visitor: Small White appeared on 12 of the 16 survey dates, with sightings spanning April to September.

Why the survey matters

This first season gives the team a valuable benchmark. Repeating the survey each year will show how butterfly numbers and diversity are changing—and whether individual species are thriving or declining.

Survey results are being shared with Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation and Hampshire Biodiversity Information Service, contributing to wider conservation work across the county. A huge thank you to Steve Bolton for training the team—and to every volunteer who took part through an exceptionally hot summer.

8 Petersfield Area Wildlife Group (PAWG)



PAWG visit to Pagham

PAWG is an informal local group for everyone and anyone interested in the natural world. Our lovely organisers, Chris and Alan Wilkins, arrange walks and visits roughly within a 30-mile radius of Petersfield. Walks are usually led by one of our members and might focus on birds, lichens, trees, flowers, insects, mammals or a combination of these. Past outings have included Farlington Marshes, the Liss railway trail, Noar Hill, Thursley Common, Pulborough Brooks and the Knepp Estate and are not limited to daylight hours - we have had some excellent evening walks observing nightjars (Iping Common and Longmoor) and bats (Petersfield). More unusual visits have included a beaver watch near East Meon and a seal watch in

Chichester Harbour. There is also a social aspect to the group as we commonly have a meal together after our outing, though this is, of course, optional. Transport need not be an issue as members are used to sharing lifts. PAWG meets roughly once a month, sometimes more often, and welcomes new members. There is no membership fee. If you are interested in being on the mailing list please contact wildlifepetersfield@gmail.com.



A spotted flycatcher is spotted in Goodyer Meadow!

Contacts, Comments, Feedback

The Friends of Petersfield Heath newsletters are distributed to all members, by email where possible, normally in the autumn and spring of each year. Copies are also sent to other local ecology and wildlife organisations as well as to local councillors, politicians, charities, and media outlets. We always welcome contributions from members or supporters so if you would like to share any photographs or contribute an article, please do get in touch. Comments or feedback on any of the articles are also greatly welcomed.

Please do forward a copy to any friends and neighbours whom you know enjoy the Heath and the pond. Please also encourage them to consider joining the Friends of Petersfield Heath as it is through our members that we connect with the Petersfield community and are able to maintain the resources to support the volunteers' important activities on the heath. They can join via our website (www.petersfieldheath.org) or by contacting me directly (secretary.foph@outlook.com).

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