

OUT & ABOUT

Big Wood and its friends

PETER FALK

Big Wood (and Littlewood) are very special places. Only 2.5% of the UK is still home to ancient woodland and both these woods are rare nature reserves. Ancient woodland is vital for biodiversity and is home to invertebrates, flora and fauna many of which are no longer present anywhere else in the UK.

Much of the preservation work is carried out by The Friends of Big Wood who manage the wood in partnership with the London Borough of Barnet. The overall objective is to manage Big Wood as amenity woodland with primary emphasis on habitat management and biodiversity. The wood is restricted to pedestrian use only and is not open to cyclists. Although most people respect this ruling, and there are signs at every entrance, there is still a

minority who cycle in the wood which can endanger pedestrians.

The old practice of coppicing the understory is still used by The Friends, which is predominately hazel, in the outer part of the wood whilst leaving the two middle compartments entirely to nature, allowing an environment of dappled shade to develop. They have created nine glades and surrounded them with dead hedging so they receive more sunlight which, in turn, stimulates the growth of dormant seeds and the development of oak saplings. New saplings have a sleeve to protect them from squirrels or dogs. The dead hedging not only deters walkers compacting the soil, but is also a vital habitat for birds and small mammals. The Friends have also erected a number of bird and bat boxes.

During lockdown many more people have visited the wood and a lot of informal paths have been created. Sadly, they damage the spread of wildflowers and disturb the ground. This means small mammals and invertebrates are adversely affected so please try to keep to the designated paths. It is also best to leave fallen branches undisturbed as a whole range of fungi/plant life etc develop on the bottom side of the log which is vital for the life cycle of the wood and offers a vital habitat for all sorts of creatures.

Ancient woods are defined as being present before 1600. Most of the oaks in Big Wood were felled at the end of the eighteenth century so most of the current oaks in the wood are 200/250 years old. The wood is also home to a significant quantity of wild cherry and crab apple trees. However, it is important to understand that ancient woodland does not cease to exist because trees in the wood are periodically felled or coppiced but also exists because of the amazing complex woodland soil and understory of plant life/seeds which have built up over a long period of time. The Woodland Trust has recently produced a new study 'The state of UK Woods and Trees' which indicates that only a small percentage of our native woods are in a healthy state and much of our woodland life is 'perilously close to collapse'.

The report says that broadleaf cover is over 60% richer in woodland plant species – one reason why a wood such as Big Wood is so important despite its small size. Many woods lack deadwood habitat, veteran trees

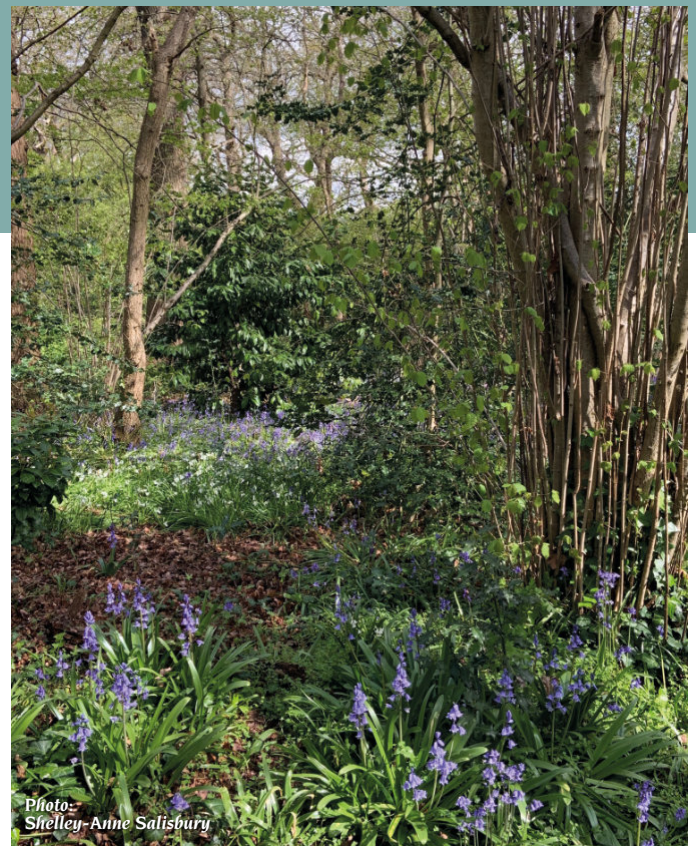


Photo: Stelley-Anne Salisbury

and life enhancing open glades and almost all are at saturation levels for nitrogen pollution. The Friends policy is to leave fallen deadwood in situ which may seem untidy but is important for the cycle of life. The amazing thing is that dead wood supports more life forms when it rots than live trees.

We hope this article will encourage readers to appreciate this little jewel of a wood and to join the Friends to help preserve it.

The full article can be found on the Friends of Big Wood website friendsofbigwood.com or, for more information, you can email friendsofbigwood1@gmail.com.

My trek to Rome

MICHAEL JACOBS

You may remember that I decided to embark on a virtual trek to Rome starting on 1st March to raise money for Nepal's children charity Kidasha. I will walk 12,250 laps of a secluded field behind my home to complete the 1,111 miles from the Suburb to St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

It was my intention to follow the medieval Pilgrim Route from London to Rome, known as the Via Francigena. Most popularly, this route commenced at Canterbury, but, of course, you had to get to Canterbury to start, and then continue via many well-known cathedrals, abbeys and monasteries. To my chagrin, it turns out that the route adopted by World Walking follows a more direct route via Newhaven and Dieppe and then via Paris and Lyon.

So I will be reporting the distances along that route to match the reports of my progress that you can see on World Walking's website. I was rather expecting to be (metaphorically) transported by ship from Newhaven to Dieppe, but it turns out that World Walking uses Google Maps and that makes no concessions for seas, so I am now (very wet and cold) deep under water, walking across the English Channel, so no landmarks since I left Newhaven. I have about 30 more miles of sea before I hit the French Coast.

For those that are interested, the publishers Cicerone have now issued a new podcast for the pilgrim route: tinyurl.com/ykwcf98.

I have walked 108 miles (174 Km), which was 1,188 laps and I am delighted to report that, at this stage, I have raised over £9,000 with Gift Aid.



Photo: Ruth Jacobs

Meantime, here on dry land, the flowers have come out, and I have seen our local fox, a ginger cat called Hen, a robin redbreast, a magpie and a jay, as well as lots of squirrels and other local wildlife.

Please support me by visiting tinyurl.com/brzpmu and you can visit tinyurl.com/4bwf79j4, where you can see my progress. For the latest updates from Nepal visit www.kidasha.org.

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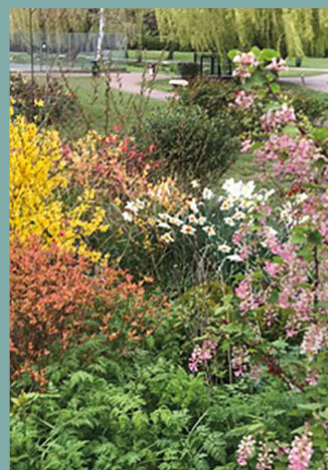
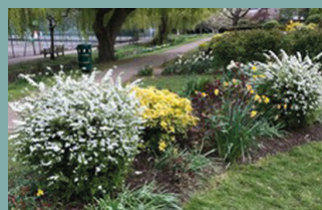


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Northway Rose Garden roses to follow!



Photos: Brian Ingram