

Dedham Vale Society

Article: Musings from Shrubs Farm

I cannot believe it is five years since I last updated these jottings, and ten since the first notes appeared. I am convinced that time is speeding up and that Summer goes faster than Winter. My favourite time of year is mid-April to the end of June and especially the month of May, the latter part of which I like to think of as "High Spring".

From about 25th April until the first week in June we hear nightingales, one of the great joys of living at Shrubs Farm, as they are now uncommon even in East Anglia. For many years they sang from the same spot, an overgrown piece of waste land in a wood to the west of the house, but in the past five years or so, they seem to have abandoned this venue and can now be heard in a wood, planted in 1994 and an older hedgerow nearby. They are also to be found in a disused gravel pit a little further away.

Almost the best time to hear them is during the day when they first arrive. If we are lucky enough to get a sunny day in late April with little or no wind, the birdsong is tremendous and the rich mellifluous notes of the nightingale can be clearly distinguished in the medley. Later, the best time is after 11pm when most other sounds have died down.

The cuckoo arrives a day or so before the nightingale, but last year I only heard it once. I wonder if others have noticed how much more uncommon this harbinger of springtime has become?

I am concerned at the drop in the numbers of song birds we see in the garden and around the farm. We have lost our sparrows and starlings and there are many fewer thrushes to be seen in the garden. Yes, we do have two cats but then we have always had cats on the farm. At my father's farm, where I remember having dozens of small birds in the garden, we had so many cats at one time that my father got fed up with them. One morning he put all but the favourite house cat in a sack on which we children had to sit in the back of the car on the way to the vet to have them put down. It was a noisy, smelly and uncomfortable journey!

We do have grey squirrels which were not around in any numbers in my boyhood and there is no shortage of corvids, (magpies, crows and the colourful jays). I think they could be the culprits. There seem to be an increasing number about and they all seem to like other birds' eggs.

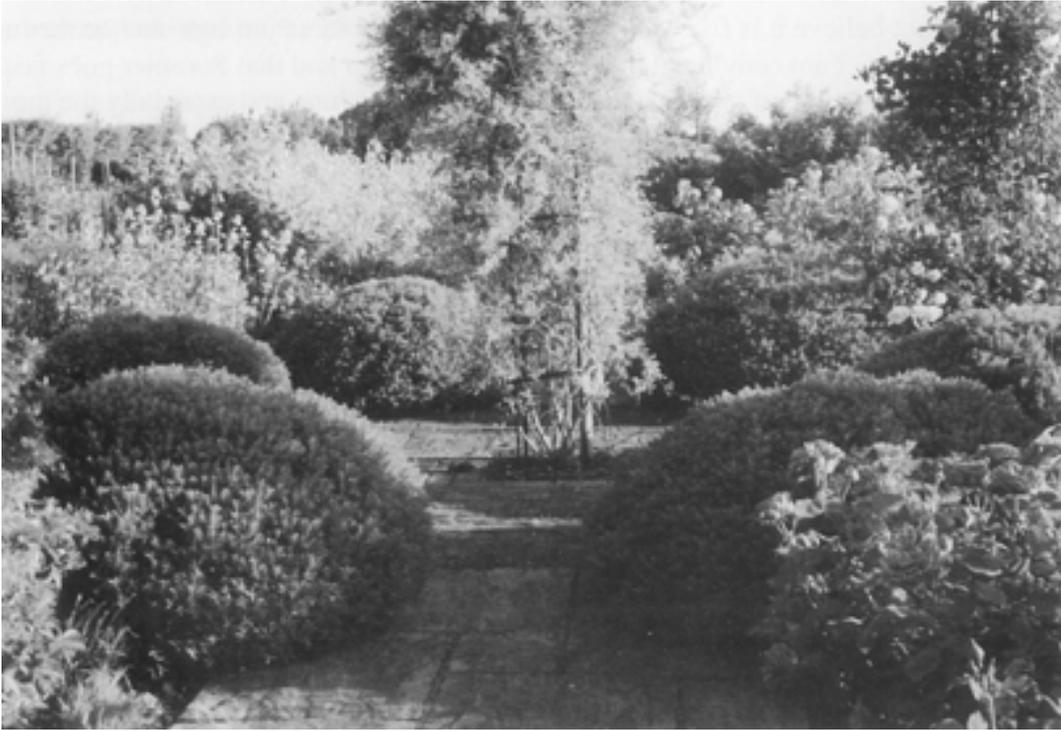
On the plus side there are many more woodpeckers, both green and greater-spotted and very occasionally the lesser-spotted variety as well. We have plenty of pheasants and French partridges and far too many pigeons. These are an absolute menace on the oilseed rape and need to be removed by bangers, which I greatly dislike. A big prize awaits the invention of a cost-effective way of dealing with these birds in silence.

The wood and hedgerow planting which we undertook in the late '80s and '90s has given cover to a far greater range of wild animals than hitherto. Although I was born and brought up on an old-fashioned mixed farm at Ardleigh, I only once saw deer there and never saw a badger. At Shrubs we see deer on almost every farm walk. These are mostly the native roe and the introduced muntjac, not much bigger than a whippet and distinguished by its bark, very similar to that made by a vixen. I have also seen fallow deer and am told that red deer have been spotted in the district.

Badgers have gone from rarity to being a serious pest in the past decade. Badgers and their setts are protected by Act of Parliament, but no thought seems to have been given about how to deal with a population explosion, when the legislation was framed. The general public think badgers are loveable and cuddly. They are not. Of course it is fascinating to watch them from a hide at dusk and we have seen the cubs playing and the adults mating. They spend a good deal of time scratching themselves and I would guess the setts are pretty flea ridden. Badgers are big animals and can do a lot of damage with their digging as well as being prime suspects in passing TB to cattle.

Nature works best when there is a healthy balance in the countryside. Nobody wants to see badgers on the verge of extinction again, but too many of any one species can lead to serious problems. I suspect we shall be hearing a lot more about this before too long.

The official end of hunting does not seem to have made any difference to the fox population but of course they will now be shot by poultry farmers and by others if there are too many about. They are still destructive vermin and one fox can destroy dozens of hens in a night if it gets into a chicken run. I would not like to see them disappear, though and it is fascinating to watch them and particularly to see the cubs play.



Views of the Garden at Shrubs Farm



Hares are now plentiful thanks to having much larger areas of undisturbed grassland into which they can make their forms for breeding. They seem to be creatures of habit and we see them year after year in exactly the same places. Again, they are a great delight to watch in early spring.

The rabbit population goes up and down depending on outbreaks of myxomatosis, but can rise very fast from low numbers if conditions are right. Our soil structure is the result of having been on the edge of the southern-most glaciers at the end of the last ice-age. We have a clay cap covering most of our land but with sandy, often marshy outcrops in the lower areas which are full of springs whose waters flow in ditches and little streams to the River Stour. Rabbits love these sandy areas and there are several large, ancient warrens in our lower meadows. Fortunately, the house and garden are on a clay cap which is not conducive for rabbits to burrow in. Thus we almost never get rabbits in the garden except for the occasional young ones which have got lost. The cats usually take care of them!

Since I last wrote in 2000, we have planted very few trees. I am aware that for the rest of my life, I will need to remove trees or completely lose the long views which used to be a feature of Shrubs Farm. I can no longer see as many church towers (I counted 18 seen from various parts of the farm five years ago) and several other distant features are now hidden when the trees are in leaf.

However we have planted two groupings of oaks from all over the world, mainly obtained from *Place for Plants* in East Bergholt. The first, planted to commemorate the Millennium, consists of 30 different oak varieties in the form of an “E”. The second was planted as a “compass” for the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002. When laying out the little whips in their pots on the ground, I based the North-South alignment on Lamarsh church tower, which I had always reckoned was due north. That evening I went back to show Sara and realised, looking at the night sky, that I was several degrees out. Fortunately, I was able to realign them on the “constant star” as Caesar describes himself in Shakespeare's play, being the North Star, which never moves in the firmament!

Most of these trees are doing well and give much pleasure and interest. You can see them on our website www.shrubsfarm.co.uk. I now have over 50 varieties and although a few will need to be replaced, I do not intend to put in too many more.

There are some 550 varieties of *Quercus* in existence. They come from all over the Northern hemisphere, but with the exception of one or two newly discovered in the mountains of Papua, they are not native south of the equator. The biggest collection in England has been the 350 or so different oaks planted by Michael Heathcoat Amory in Devon. Locally, Carol Gurney at Higham, Jeremy Hill at Bures and Christopher Palmer-Tomkinson at Little Bentley have a considerable range of rare oaks of particular interest and note. All have fascinating collections of other trees as well and I much admire the skill and knowledge with which these plantsmen have built their collections.

One discovery of note is that we are told we have the largest *Salix Caprea*, commonly known as Goat or Pussy willow, in England. It has obviously been pollarded many times as part of what was once an ancient hedge. I did not know what it was until a tree expert came to have a look round. Pussy willows are normally rather small, shrubby trees, so our friend got very excited about this specimen. It is about nine feet in diameter at a height of four feet from the ground and is covered in knobbly burrs. Nearby, as part of the same old hedge line is a huge old hazel coppice which must be at least 500 years old and some gnarled hawthorns with wild roses growing up them. They are a pretty sight in early summer when the roses are in flower.

The hedges we planted between 1987 and 1995 are all doing well and some are now over 20 ft high. To the untutored eye they look fully mature, but of course they are not. We shall soon have to start cutting some of them down, either to about three feet high or to the ground. We will coppice or lay a small number of hedges each winter in a fifteen year rotation. This is essential if really strong, thick hedges are to be established. If you leave a hedge untouched for a long period it will usually become a line of scrappy trees and full of gaps. Quite useless, except as a windbreak. I have examples of where this has happened and it is not very attractive. Of course there are many hedges that are so thick that they can safely be left, but these are very old and well-established.

The wildflower walks and meadows sown in 1994 are maturing and as a result the plant mix is changing in a subtle way, with numbers of cowslips increasing steadily but oxeye daisies less dominant than in earlier years.

You may be aware of the term “*set-aside*” to describe arable land which is left uncultivated. In 1990, we decided to put a field which had been in arable production for as long as anyone could remember, into *set-aside* on a permanent basis. We sowed it with a fairly cheap ryegrass mixture and no further fertilisers or weed-killers have been applied. Sheep have been grazing there in the periods allowed under the *set-aside* rules and the grass has only been mowed annually in late July. Over the subsequent fifteen years a rich profusion of wildflowers has established itself without any help from us. Last June we stumbled across a patch of bee orchids including the largest concentration of a rare variety, *Ophrys Apifera* Var. *bicolor* yet found in the British Isles as well as the uncommon white var. *chlorantha*. Orchids are capricious things and I cannot guarantee that they will be on display again next summer, but we live in hope. This just shows how amazing are the recovery powers of which nature is capable when left alone for a while and I hope to report more items of interest in due course.

The wood we planted in the wet winter of 1992 has done very well, except on one steep slope with thin soil. The contrast here is very marked with spindly, sad looking trees which will never be much good. The other two 1000-tree woods planted in the much drier year of 1994 are also well established, but growth has been markedly slower. One of these woods was planted mainly to hide some utilitarian buildings put up by a neighbour but it is touch-and-go whether, at the rate the trees are growing, the buildings disappear before I do!

The crops are looking well this winter. The autumn conditions were unusually kind with just the right amount of rainfall after a relatively easy harvest. Winter wheat in particular has come up strongly and this bodes well for yields, although it is early days yet. Our rape has not had such an easy time and some has had to be ploughed in. In the spring we shall be sowing barley for malting and borage for pharmaceutical purposes.

Farming is going through a difficult time at present and conditions are changing rapidly. Prices of the main commodities such as feed wheat are half what they were a decade ago and costs of production have doubled. This is not a healthy equation and few farmers, even the very largest, can make a profit under these conditions. Some farmers will give up, but most being resourceful, will find new ways of making ends meet. One agri-baron in the fens told me the other day that his farm was now essentially a property business and farmers everywhere will be looking to make more use of underutilized farm buildings.

Support from the European Union has changed since the start of 2005 and is now based much more on environmental management as opposed to being tied to the production of crops. I think it was Lenin who said that *all governments are three square meals from revolution*. It was this and the fact that our enemies over the past 200 years have three times tried to starve us by blockading imported food supplies, which lead to successive governments subsidising farmers to produce enough so that the country could be self-sufficient in essential foods.

Now these threats are thought to have disappeared, the emphasis is on allowing third world nations to compete on level terms. We cannot compete easily on this basis with countries which have dramatically lower labour costs than ourselves (and sometimes questionable standards of hygiene etc). Subsidies will be phased out after 2012 and the countryside will inevitably change from the patterns we have been used to. This will have an impact on the Dedham Vale as elsewhere. Already, the AONB has more woodland than for several hundred years and trees continue to be planted each year. Our grandchildren will see a very different landscape than the one we grew up with in the latter years of the last century.

At a thought provoking lecture given last year to the Essex Agricultural Society, John Gummer MP, formerly Secretary of State for the Environment and Minister for Agriculture, reminded us of how isolated from the rest of the community farmers now are. The vast majority of the population is urban or suburban and most people living in the countryside have little knowledge of agriculture. Only two generations ago, far more of us had some links with the land.

One way to try and redress this position, encouraged by the authorities, is a scheme called Educational Access, by which schoolchildren visit farms and learn about plants, animals and the work which goes on. We signed up to this scheme with enthusiasm only to find that the vast majority of schools in the area have budgets and timetables which are so constrained that they are unable or unwilling to take advantage of this initiative. Fortunately, I was able to coax two parties of six-year olds to visit us from Littlegarth last summer. The result was pure joy. I was astonished at the childrens' enthusiasm, thirst for knowledge and interest in all they saw. I hope for many more such visits in the future.

As mentioned earlier, we established our own web-site www.shrubsfarm.co.uk initially to interest those who might come to our garden open days in aid of The National Gardens Scheme. Now we shall slant it to be of greater educational interest.

We have decided not to have any official open days in 2006 but will be very pleased to show individuals and groups of visitors round the farm and garden by appointment for a small contribution to the National Gardens Scheme. Members of the Dedham Vale Society, the Colne Stour Countryside Association and CPREssex will be particularly welcome.

Robert Erith 29th December 2005