



AMBLECOTE HISTORY

Number 13

The Newsletter of Amblecote History Society

December 2005

CONSERVATION MATTERS



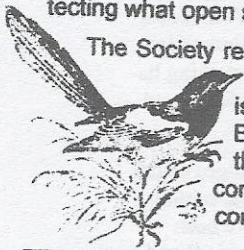
As the Society has developed it has become obvious that not only do our member's interests lie in 'historical history' but also in natural history, and that Amblecote, as place where until recently open fields were relatively common,

has important flora and fauna survivals.

Equally, with land prices so high and developers squeezing ever more residential units into even smaller and smaller spaces, the pressure on what little open land remains is becoming extreme.

Here in Amblecote over the past thirty years we have seen large areas of open fields along with accompanying hedgerows and woodland turned (in many cases via open cast mining) into urban sprawl, leaving us with a few precious threads and islands of greenery. Furthermore, because of the ex-industrial (or soon to be so) nature of many sites in our area, developers can use the disingenuous argument that they are 'reclaiming' brown-field land and not removing ancient open space. Disingenuous because, as both we and they know, the nature of our part of the Black Country was to see farmland and industry co-exist and that many ex-industrial sites would happily return to nature if they were just left to do so, whilst there are some precious areas in Amblecote that have never been developed at all.

The people of the countryside proper are quite rightly militant when it comes to protecting their environment from urban encroachment. However, with 'our fields' already built on, it is vital that we in Amblecote adopt an equally vigorous stance in protecting what open space and greenery remains.



The Society recently appointed two Conservation Officers; Helen Cook and Clare Tongue whose task is to focus efforts on nature conservation. Both have provided articles for this edition of the newsletter, Helen on Amblecote's green corridors, and Clare of the welcome return of common buzzards to the area.

MURDER BRIDGE APPEAL

Nick Baker would be pleased to hear from anyone with memories or knowledge of the 'Murder Bridge' which previously linked Withymoor with the fields above Coal-bournbrook. Any thoughts, stories or rumours about the murder would be welcome, but any recollection of any kind will be of interest.

Nick can be contacted on
01384 894446 – please leave a message if I am out.

EVENTS

JAN-MARCH 2006

January 11th

Annual General Meeting

Notice is given that the second AGM of Amblecote History Society will be held at Amblecote Church Hall on January 11th 2006 commencing 7.30pm.

February 8th

Chris Modd

"A Soldier at the Battle of Worcester"

Chris is a well known re-enactor based at Mosely Old Hall and will continue our English Civil War theme with a vivid description and demonstration of the method and means of infantry combat during the mid seventeenth century.

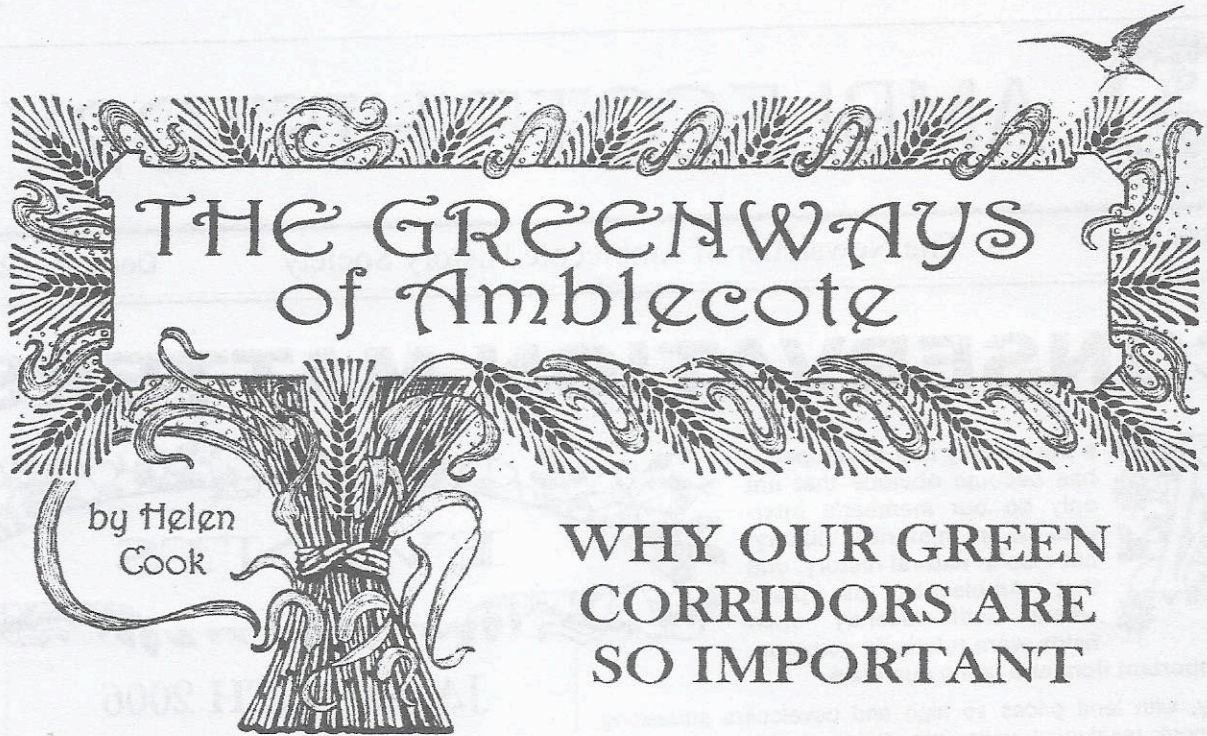
March 8th

General Meeting.

All Meetings are held at Amblecote Church Hall commencing 7.30pm unless otherwise stated.

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WHY OUR GREEN CORRIDORS ARE SO IMPORTANT

Amblecote's Rural Past

The 1688 map of Amblecote Manor shows a almost completely rural landscape that must have flourished with wildlife. The red squirrel would then have been as common as the grey squirrel is today. The noise of the comcrake calling in the corn fields would have been a common sound. We would have seen red kite riding the thermals in search of their quarry, which would have been abundant in those days. All of these are now extinct from the Home Counties and West Midlands.

However, we now have a good chance, in a few years perhaps, to look forward to seeing the red kite over Amblecote again because of successful conservation and re-introduction projects in Wales and Oxfordshire with these birds.

Years ago hedgerows were planted to divide land as the Enclosure Acts came into force. These hedgerows were usually of a mix of hazel, field maple, hawthorn, elm and holly. Brambles would find their way into the hedges and all provided an abundance of food and cover for birds, insects and butterflies. The hazel nuts, blackberries and haws being one of the major food supplies for the dormouse, which only now survives in a habitat that Amblecote has long lost. The river Stour would have had salmon and trout swimming to their spawning grounds. There would have been crayfish in the Coalbourne Brook, living happily alongside freshwater shrimps and other aquatic life within the clean water environment

The Industrial Revolution

Then along came the industrial revolution and massive scars appeared. The arable fields and grazing meadows disappearing, resulting in startling changes to our landscape. In Amblecote, our earth was rich with raw materials needed for glassmaking. We sat on a major coal measure so our landscape and environment began to alter, with the massive works of deep coal mining. Other industries included brick making and tanneries arose and along the river Stour many mills were adopted to cater for these. Mills that had



previously milled corn now drove forges and furnaces. This plunder of the landscape brought about massive environmental changes and imbalance to natural habitats. The 1688 map was rapidly changing; gone were many of the fields and hedgerows which had provided such sustenance for our local fauna and flora and these gradually began to reduce in number.

The destruction of the environment did not stop there. Industrial waste began to be dumped and discharged into our watercourses. The tiny Coalbourne Brook, along with other small streams that were tributaries of the river Stour, began to suffer. The crayfish disappeared and the waters turned black and poisoned. In those days there were no rigorous environmental, health or safety standards, nor were there eager and keen environmentalists who today act as the watchdogs for our wildlife.

Urban Development and Open Cast

During this time social house building began in Amblecote to accommodate the workforce involved in the many industries now operating in the parish. Yet somehow Amblecote still managed to hang on to its rural status even though its landscape value was much reduced - in fact by retaining its own council the community still kept a 'village' feel about it.

By the late 1960's and into the early 1970's, changes began to take place on a massive scale. The deep pit coal mining became exhausted (this is now recognized to have been more environmentally sympathetic than we imagined) and once again a major impact to our landscape and ecology took place, with the whole of the pit area being turned into opencast mining. This resulted in good top soil being taken away and with it went all of the vegetation, leaving a cold moonscape of grey clay craters. These craters were so deep that the mechanical diggers moving around in them appeared like matchbox toys, but the result was that nothing in the way of wildlife could survive here.

By now the major housing estate at Trinity Road was being built next to the Corbett Hospital Meadow, taking away a some of the wonderful wildflower habitat that had attracted many butterflies, moths and insects. With the completion of



this estate the Corbett meadow became the green island it is today.

When open cast mining ceased in the late 1970s more high density housing was built on this vast open area that became known as the Withymore estate. Amongst the precious things now lost was the little country lane that used to be Vicarage Road. This lane used to run from the church and over the railway bridge past the Birch Tree pub to Amblecote Road. In those days it was possible to pick blackberries by the basket full.

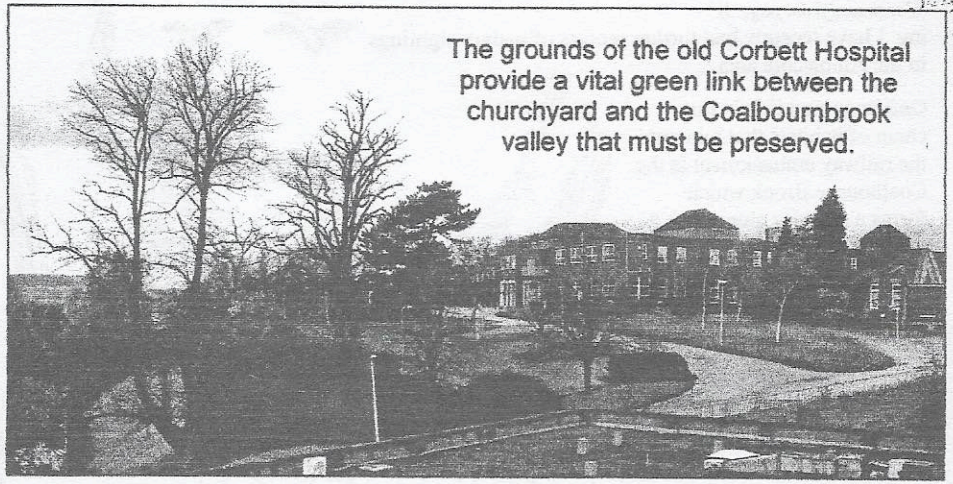
Withymoor is now separated from Trinity Road Estate by only the railway line and embankment and the canal from Brierley Hill.

Since these two major developments took place in the 1980s we have lost another of our once beautiful areas, the Clockfields, now a large housing estate. This was an area where wildflowers were abundant; but more importantly it was a haven for a many species of butterflies.

Clockfields Estate now is a huge area of high density housing joining with the Trinity Road Estate and separated from the even more urbanised Collis Street only by the Coalbourne Brook. This tiny watercourse forms an important green corridor that stretches from the railway embankment to Dennis Hall Park and the allotments.

Another of our green areas lost forever was the Stourbridge Grammar School Cricket pitch and pavilion. A gem for sports loving people of the parish, the pitch was said to be as good as any county cricket pitch. Like many other open spaces it was sold for housing and is now known as Cricketers Green. This is now adjacent to Amblecote Holy Trinity Church and churchyard, another of our precious green sanctuaries.

One of the many penalties we have paid in wildlife terms is that we have lost our dawn chorus, I have not heard the call



The grounds of the old Corbett Hospital provide a vital green link between the churchyard and the Coalbournbrook valley that must be preserved.

of the cuckoo or seen a yellowhammer or bullfinch since these developments. The greenfinch and goldfinch seem not to be as frequent to the area, gone along with many species of butterfly.

The Green Corridors

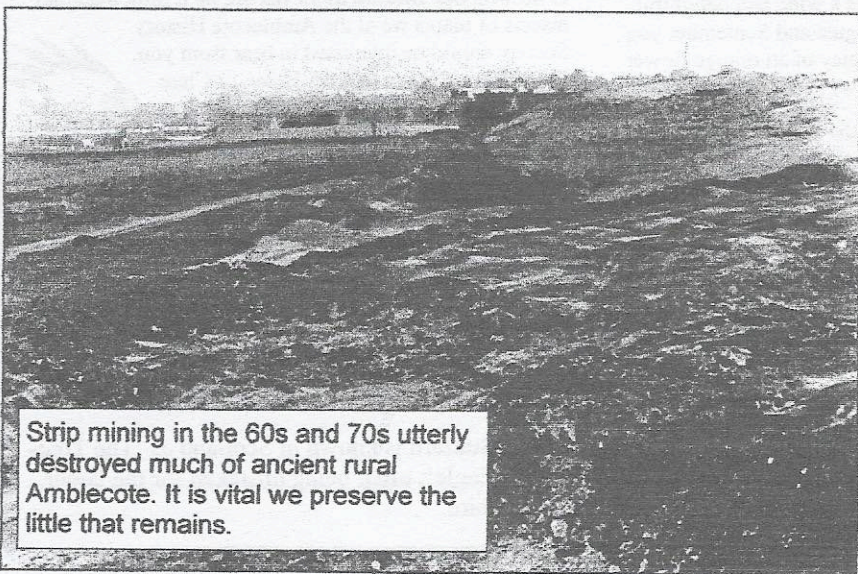
So why are the surviving green corridors that surround and cross Amblecote so important? Because they provide an important link between one natural habitat to another. Some animals use them to pass through to other places and other make them their permanent home. Green corridors with their vegetation provide much needed cover from predators, including man. They also provide the environment to create a natural food chain.

Amblecote offers a good variety of green corridors, a major one being the River Stour along with the adjacent canal. These are regularly monitored by the Environment Agency and we now hear reports of salmon returning to the river, the kingfisher been reported along different stretches of the river and can be regularly seen. The river is now cleaner than it has been for perhaps two hundred years, as it was before the industries came. A main indicator is that of otter spraints being found along the Stour near Kidderminster. Who knows, perhaps one day soon we may once again watch otters from the bridge over the river at Stourbridge?

The railway embankment also offers a good habitat for wild flowers as these embankments are such of poor soil. If these areas continue to remain slightly overgrown and fairly wild they will provide cover and passage for mammals such as the fox, stoat and weasel, these in turn will find the smaller mammals, mice, voles and brown rat as prey.

As an example of this, before the new construction works at the Corbett Hospital, I observed two badgers in the meadow. We have yet to conclude how they got there, it seems that they were just passing through! But it is almost certain that they would have used the corridors to get there. They appeared to be using one of the fox earths for sleep-

(Continued on page 4)



Strip mining in the 60s and 70s utterly destroyed much of ancient rural Amblecote. It is vital we preserve the little that remains.

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ing. I have recently had further reports of badger sightings in the Amblecote area.

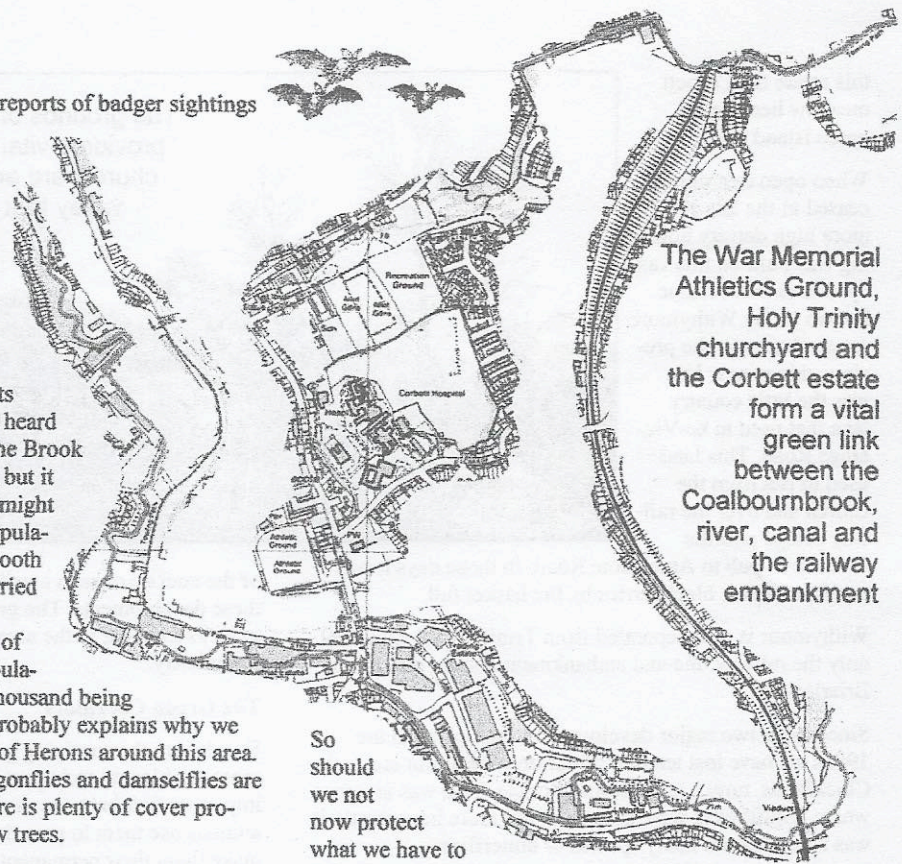
One important link in this chain of habitats that join onto the railway embankment is the Coalbourne Brook which forms a corridor along with a green public right of way into Dennis Hall Park. Nearby are the allotments, adjacent to the ancient Corbett meadow, with its grassland and ponds. I have not heard of any crayfish in the Coalbourne Brook probably due to past pollutions, but it once was a suitable habitat and might be again. Nearby are healthy populations of frogs, toads and the Smooth Newt. An amphibian survey carried out on the pond in the Corbett meadow recorded three species of amphibian with a very high population of frogs, in excess of two thousand being recorded in March 1992. This probably explains why we have such a healthy population of Herons around this area. During the summer months dragonflies and damselflies are often seen. Along the brook there is plenty of cover provided by the large Crack Willow trees.

The allotments obviously provide an abundance of food and cover for a variety of wildlife. Whilst unfortunately some of it is not always welcome by the allotment holders, most of us will try to work side by side with the wild life around us. I have seen many birds that are common in and around this district; some like the Kestrel, Goldfinch and Greenfinch are resident. In the winter months Redwings are seen, where they regularly feed in the Corbett meadow.

We also have Holy Trinity Church and churchyard providing added wildlife value. Churchyards throughout the country are now recognized and designated as SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest). They are havens for wildlife, most are usually fairly quiet and areas and within them are often allowed to grow wild. They provide excellent cover for small mammals and again at Amblecote a nesting site for Kestrels. Several times I have sat at the traffic lights by the church observing a Kestrel hovering above the churchyard. Our churchyard also provides a wide and delightful variety of wildflowers. During August and September you may have noticed a wonderful display of an orange flower called Orange Hawkweed that grows abundantly there.

Opposite the churchyard we have the making of another green corridor which takes us through the gates into the War Memorial Athletics Ground. Although separated from the other green corridors by the main Wolverhampton road separates it still provides a link that will allow movement down to the canal and river.

Another fine area was gas works site. Two years ago you could regularly hear the sound of the Chiff Chaff calling in the spring, the old scrub providing cover and habitat for other birds like the Dunnock and Robin. Wrens could be seen flitting across the space. A walk along Gasometer Lane would allow us the pleasure of viewing these birds. Now this site has been cleared and they are no more. Who knows what hangs in the balance for this controversial area, not just important for its wildlife value but also geologically.



The War Memorial Athletics Ground, Holy Trinity churchyard and the Corbett estate form a vital green link between the Coalbourne brook, river, canal and the railway embankment

So should we not now protect what we have to offer the wildlife in Amblecote?

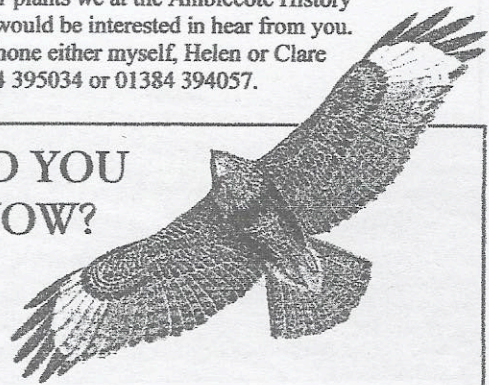
The Need To Protect

These green corridors are all that we have left and we need to protect them to ensure a safe passage for the birds and animals to and from other habitats. We also need to secure these green areas a future for ourselves, to allow us to observe the wildlife using these corridors. Remember that Amblecote is now no longer a rural parish being now joined to, and part of, the Dudley conurbation. It has only taken thirty years for our green areas to become a mass of concrete, brick and tarmac, and still it goes on.

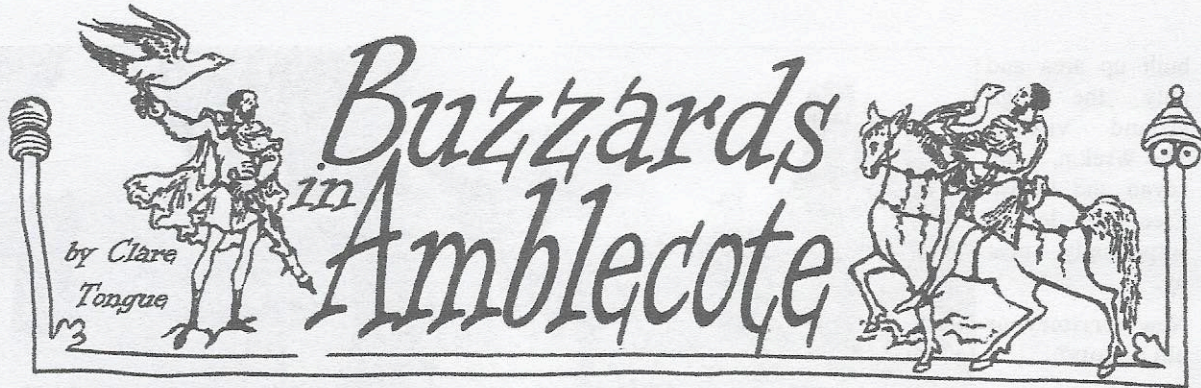
Let Us Know

Recently we have had several Buzzard sightings over Amblecote and in the Corbett Meadow. If you notice any thing to do with our wildlife in the parish, be it bird, mammal, insects or plants we at the Amblecote History Society would be interested in hear from you. Please phone either myself, Helen or Clare on 01384 395034 or 01384 394057.

DID YOU KNOW?



The Buzzard is known in Scotland as 'The Tourist's Eagle'; often being mistaken for the larger, rarer bird.



Buzzards in Amblecote

by Clara
Tongue

As a number of you have mentioned buzzards are being seen with increasing frequency in the skies over Amblecote. This is very exciting and possibly a sight not seen in Amblecote since the 18th century.

We first caught sight of this impressive raptor locally in about August of this year. Whilst bat watching in the churchyard we saw a huge bird glide across the sky and managed to follow it to its perch in a nearby silver birch on the former gas works site. Fortunately we had binoculars and were able to clearly identify a Common Buzzard. We knew of sparrow hawks and kestrels in the area but were amazed by the sheer size of this auspicious bird of prey. A few weeks earlier I had seen an unidentified bird of prey circling over the Corbett grounds and am now convinced this too was a buzzard. The sight of a distant bird soaring effortlessly on broad wings does not prepare you for the sheer bulk of the bird at close quarters.

We have subsequently seen the buzzards with increasing frequency. At the canal open weekend in October many people saw a pair circling over the canal to everyone's amazement. We have taken this as a hopeful sign meaning the buzzards are checking out potential nest sites for next year. A couple of weeks later one beautiful Monday morning, I then saw three buzzards together circling over the Holloway and even managed to take photographs. A few days later whilst on a walk around the War Memorial Athletics Ground, a buzzard flew low over the pitch to the copse on the sandstone cliff. A few minutes later it returned being noisily mobbed by three crows.

Why Amblecote?

Although urban, our little corner of the Black Country is surprisingly well wooded as anyone standing on Corbett Hill looking west will see. Buzzards favour a patch work of open country and scattered woodland for nesting. Amblecote, unusually for an urban area, does possess quite substantial tracts of woodland. With the proximity of open countryside west of Wollaston and the substantial 'green corridors' of the Stour and Coalbournebrook valleys it is perhaps not surprising a buzzard should see Amblecote as a potential territory. Their typical territory is described as. "Woodland but also moorland and grassy fields with adjacent copses or shelter belts."

(Gooders 2001) the RSPB website describe it's habitat as "trees and hilly crags for nesting with open farmland and moorland nearby to feed over." Areas such as the meadow, churchyard, recreation ground and gas works site are clearly suitable open spaces bordered by areas of mature trees and scrub ideal for hunting.

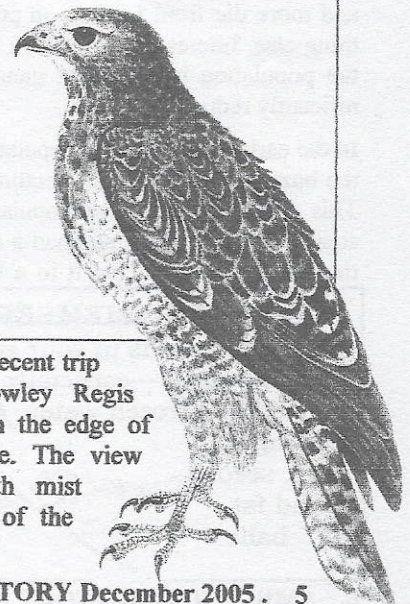
A buzzard's diet consists principally of small rodents but they will also take birds, reptiles, amphibians, larger insects and earthworms. The ancient pond in the Corbett meadow has one of the largest breeding populations of frogs in the area and this may also be a draw for the buzzards.

"Hilly crags" are mimicked in Amblecote by the sandstone cliff running the length of the Stour valley through our area. Much of Amblecote is essentially a ridge jutting up to a height of 426ft (130m) at the southern edge of the South Staffs coalfield. Contrast this with the 215ft (66m) in the Stour valley and you'll understand how cragg-like the topography of Amblecote really is. This topography also provides the buzzard with the thermals they are so fond of on

The Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Size: Stands 50-55cm tall and has a wingspan 115-130cm. It has broad wings with slotted tips and a blunt rounded tail and a stout body.

Markings: Highly variable from predominantly dark brown to almost completely white. Most in the UK are mostly brown with white blotches and lightly barred flight feathers.



clear sunny days. A recent trip to Turners Hill Rowley Regis revealed just how on the edge of open country we are. The view was spectacular with mist shrouding out most of the

built up area and only the high ground visible. The Wrekin, Long Mynd and Brown Clee all looked surprisingly near by.

New territory or old haunts?

Amblecote does lie right at the edge of the 'traditional' distribution of the buzzard. Bird books



Amblecote's extensive sandstone cliffs - the result of decades of sand extraction - mimic the natural habitat of the Buzzard. These examples are from old quarries in Old Wharf Road behind the War Memorial Athletics Ground.

from as little as ten years ago show Amblecote right at the edge of their distribution. A look further back into the history of buzzards in the UK reveals persecution since the 18th century. This resulted in the population being confined to relict populations in the West of England, Wales and Scotland. Hastings writing in 1828 about birds in Worcestershire suggests, "The sparrow hawk, kestrel, merlin, honey buzzard, hen harrier, buzzard and hobby are not of uncommon occurrence." Curtler writing in 1853 suggests buzzards were still resident in Worcestershire but Harthan in 1955 writes, "the buzzard nested again in the county in 1943 after being absent as a resident for a hundred years." It seems the fluctuations in size and distribution of Buzzard population is by no means a recent phenomenon.

During the mid 19th century buzzards were persecuted by gamekeepers to the point of extinction in some areas. They have always been particularly susceptible to poisoning and more die from feeding on poison baits than anything else. Interestingly between the two World Wars the population increased as game keeping was significantly reduced.

In the early 1950's just as populations were increasing the buzzard fell prey to the outbreak of myxomatosis. This decimated the rabbit population as a major food source of the buzzard and had a devastating effect on the population, reducing it to a little as

13,000 in the whole of the UK. Buzzards were also significantly hit by organochlorine pesticide contamination and have only really shown signs of a rapid population increase since the mid 1990's.

Current reports from the 'British Trust for Ornithology' confirm that buzzards are now the most abundant diurnal raptor in Britain. The RSPB website estimates the UK population in 2001 to be somewhere between 44,000-61,000 territorial pairs and since 2000 can

report nesting sites in every county of the UK. It is this rapid expansion in numbers since the mid '90's which means we are privileged

enough to see once again this impressive raptor over Amblecote. A sight possibly not seen in these parts since the 18th century!

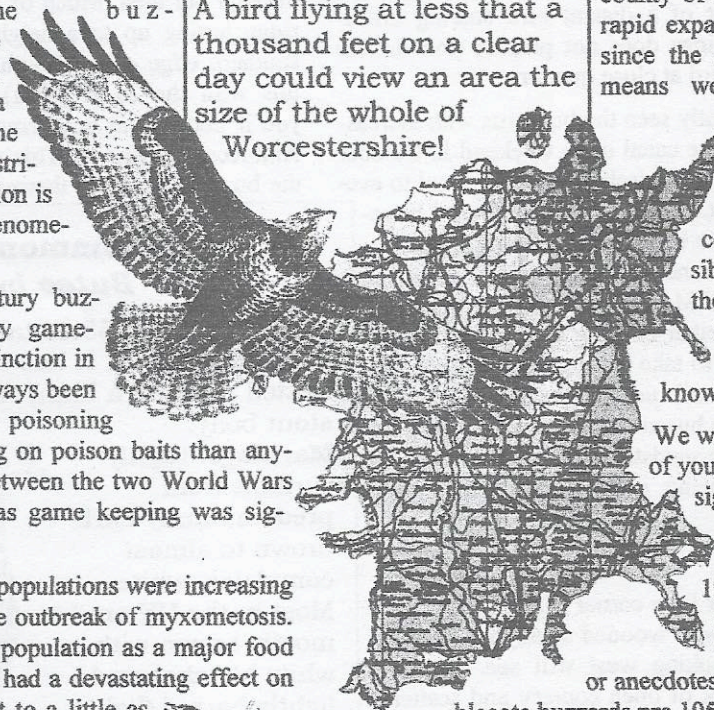
Unless you know different?

We would love to hear of your local buzzard sightings especially if they have been since the

1990's? We would also love to hear of any sightings

or anecdotes relating to Amblecote buzzards pre 1950's.

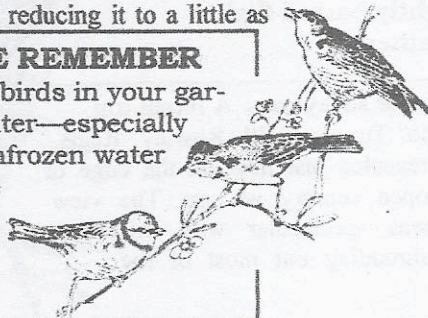
A bird flying at less than a thousand feet on a clear day could view an area the size of the whole of Worcestershire!



Please contact Helen 01384 395034 or Clare on 01384 394057

Watch out, watch out there are Buzzards about! Happy Raptor Watching

PLEASE REMEMBER
To feed the birds in your garden this winter—especially providing unfrozen water along side nuts, seeds and fat balls



MEDAL TALK - BRITISH CAMPAIGN MEDALS



The Society's September meeting heard Reg Cook present a talk on British Campaign Medals. Reg explained the history of British medals, which grew out of an informal system of commemorating a soldier's or sailor's involvement in individual actions during the late Napoleonic wars (Trafalgar was a notable example), to the formal presentation of awards for service in theatres of deployment. Combining historical records and medal sets Reg was able to trace a number of service careers, making the medals more than simply 'objects' but instead a fascinating representation of a serviceman's life and times. Although providing no direct Amblecote connection, Reg's talk struck a number of local chords with many servicemen in the district in receipt of general and specific campaign medals, especially those of the First and Second World Wars.

ESCAPE FROM WORCESTER

In November the Society heard a talk by Roger Pendrill who told the story of his family's involvement in the escape of Charles II from the Battle of Worcester in 1651. The route, as many locals know, initially took Charles through Stourbridge and Amblecote as his small party sought a safe house and a means of getting the King out of the country.

Roger painted a vivid picture of the Kings initial flight, crossing open country between Worcester and Stourbridge in a desperate attempt to avoid both pursuing Parliamentary forces and his own fleeing Scottish infantry. By nightfall the King's party had reached Stourbridge, where they briefly paused for refreshment, before heading north for Boscabel House. Here Charles was taken in by the local Catholic 'underground', which included the Pendrill family of yeomen farmers. Persecuted to varying degrees for generations, the better off Catholic families of the West Midlands were

experts at subterfuge and the hiding of *personas non grata*. Charles, although of necessity an official Protestant, was known to have strong Catholic, or at least non-Puritan, leanings and thus prompted considerable loyalty amongst this class.

Roger then explained in great detail the events that drew the Pendrill's further and further into the escape plan – indeed at times formulating it. An attempt to take Charles on foot across the Severn and into Wales failed as Parliamentary forces saturated the area with troops, and Richard Pendrill was forced to return to the area around Boscabel with the King. During this episode there occurred one of the most famous events in English history, when Richard hid with the King in an oak tree on the estate. Roger explained the event in detail which, having since attained an almost mystical aura (the King protected by the 'magic' oak, symbol of ancient England), most certainly took place. After several narrow escapes, made narrower by unhelpful arrogance on the part of other escaping Royalist



grandees, the King was at last taken south disguised as a servant before being taken to exile in France.

Roger talked about the consequences for the family of the escape, with the Pendrills practiced enough at deception to steer clear of trouble throughout the Commonwealth period. After the Restoration the family made themselves known to the King who rewarded them with a pension that is still paid today, albeit at the original rate and subdivided many times.

Above all, the point was made that King Charles II, unlike any monarch since, was forced, in order to survive, to live and behave as a 'commoner'; an experience that remained with him throughout the rest of his life.



Touring Amblecote in Old Photographs

The October meeting of the Society saw over eighty members and guests view a presentation prepared by Mike Perkins and Nick Baker in which a number of vintage photographs of Amblecote were compared to their modern equivalents. The bulk of the older pictures were discovered in early 2005 at the Stafford County Archives and consist of fifteen survey photographs of Amblecote taken by Stourbridge Council in August 1933 during one of their periodic attempts to take over the UDC.

During this summer Mike and Nick had attempted to obtain 'then and now' equivalents by trying to stand in exactly the same spot and take a modern photograph (although they didn't quite stand in the exact modern spot on every occasion – the middle of the A491 for example!). In fact, as

time went by, they managed to obtain further vintage (and not so vintage) photographs that enabled a 'landscape hopping' photographic presentation across both time and topography.

Using a combination of maps and photos the now lost landscape of the upper Coalbourn valley was re-created, showing a vast area of mines and works that is now entirely urban and utterly changed by open cast extraction and land

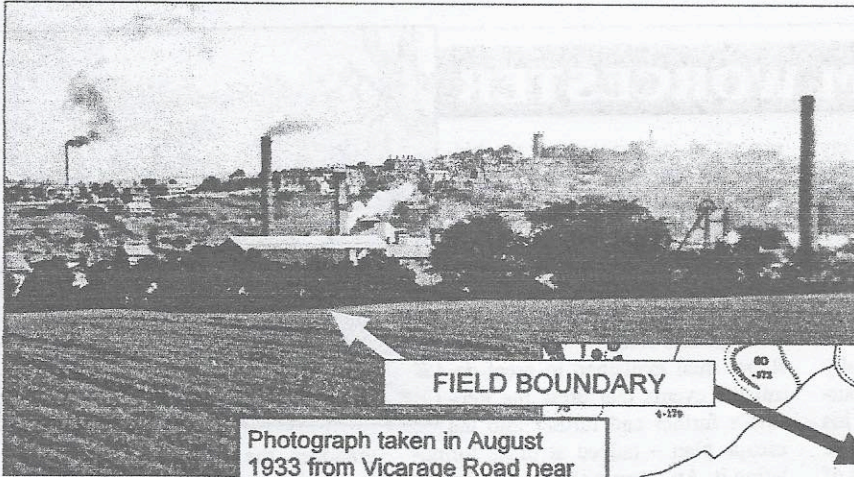
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Touring Amblecote in Old Photographs

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reclamation. Other lost features included the GWR Goods Yard and the old Stour bridge, now the site of a trading estate and the ring road respectively.

Two fascinating old photographs of the interior and exterior of the Amblecote Infant Welfare Centre in High Street were



FIELD BOUNDARY

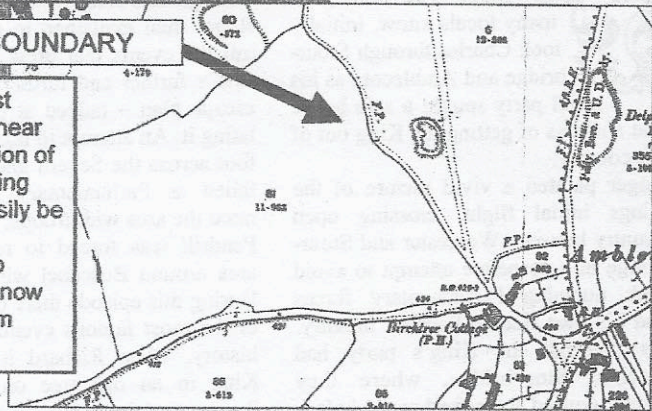
Photograph taken in August 1933 from Vicarage Road near the Birch Tree in the direction of Brierley Hill. Lost and existing landscape features can easily be identified. This area of fields was strip mined in the 1970's and is now the location of Sandringham Way.

also 'brought forward' through time by the use of photographs taken by Mike in the 1980's when this building (by then an Indian take-away) was demolished.

Using a series of reference points consisting largely of chimneys and church towers it was also possible to use several old pictures to make a linked serial view, over time, of the landscape from several perspectives. Most notably the chimneys of John Hall's Brickworks was visible on a 1933 picture taken from Silver End which could be cross referenced with an aerial picture of the works taken a year earlier. A series of 1950's - 60's photographs supplied by

Allan Edwards (ex-MD of John Hall's) then enabled a 'ground level' exploration of the works, followed by a 70's view of the open cast working in which the chimney of Corbett Hospital boiler house was visible. This was then 'linked' by showing pictures, recently donated to the Society by ex-hospital engineer Don Ingram, taken from the top of this chimney in the 1990's. The point was made that even these relatively recent pictures are now invaluable historic documents, the boiler house having been demolished this year; with the rest of the old hospital destined to follow.

Mike and Nick would like to appeal to anyone with old photographs of Amblecote to consider sharing them with the Society. Pictures can be easily copied without causing any damage and returned promptly. These photographs can then be placed within a wider Amblecote context by 'fitting them in' with other pictures. Please remember that even back-garden snapshots are of immense interest, with background details often inadvertently creeping in. Bring them along to meetings or call Nick on 01384 894446 or Mike on 01384 824894.



HISTORIC STUDY

Mrs Mary Knowles has donated an unusual item via Ian Williams to the Society's growing collection of documents. Mary's grandfather, Fred Cartwright, lived at No.20 Stamford Road and the object originally came from him. Dating to the 1920's this is a card advertising the stud services of the Hackney Stallion, Ribble Chief which belonged to A.E.Mason of Bagley's Farm, Amblecote. Giving a four generation pedigree, the card promises that Ribble Chief "...snaps his knees and flexes his hocks as a good hackney should do."

