

The Unlocking of Spring

The wonder of the world
The beauty and the power,
The shape of things,
Their colours, lights and shades,
These I saw,
Look ye also while life lasts.
BB (Denys Watkins-Pitchford)

Late January, and hedgerows and woodland edges were lit with hazel catkins, golden and heavy with pollen. Slowly the countryside was waking from its winter slumber.

Warmer days in early February brought hungry bumblebees to attend the kaleidoscopes of Crocuses and Snowdrops by Lower Green. Two weeks later, Blackthorn was dressed in an abundance of dazzling bridal-white blossom.

By the 4th March regiments of golden Daffodils lined village verges, and the first star-like flowers of Lesser Celandines adorned the roadside banks along Tewin Hill. Blackbirds were singing most beautifully, and frogs returning to garden ponds. In the words of Marnie Barrell's inspiring hymn, "nature was bursting forth with joyful promise". Embraced by the unfolding season, we were flourishing through contact with the natural world.

Then, on 23rd March, came "lockdown"; instructions to remain at home. Was coronavirus to steal our enjoyment of spring?

Our Digswell garden offered some compensation. Cowslips were in flower, and Tawny Mining Bees excavating nest cavities in our lawn. Yet we yearned to be out in the countryside, breathing and feeling the spring, enjoying fresh colours and spring flowers, and welcoming returning summer birds.

In *Wild Child* and an article *Rewilding Children* in *British Wildlife*, published in April, Patrick Barkham deplores the damage caused to children by their loss of freedom to roam, and removal indoors. Throughout our lives our physical, mental and spiritual health benefits hugely from our exposure to the natural world. It increases longevity and immunity to disease. It makes us happier, betters our perspectives, and inspires our creativity. We have ever been part of it, are bonded to it, and we all need it.

Then, unexpectedly, on the 2nd May, the Chief Medical Officer advised that members of the same household driving out and taking walks in isolation were not increasing risks of infection. This was just what we needed to hear. That evening we commenced twice weekly walks.

Along the eastern boundary of the parish lies a magnificent wildlife-rich semi-natural ancient woodland. The footpath along its western edge continues by an ancient hedgerow to an attractive farmstead and pastures. The panoramic views across rolling countryside to Bramfield Park Wood and Tewin Hill are perfection. Embraced by a beautiful silence, unbroken by traffic noise, we listened to Chiffchaffs, Garden Warblers, and Blackcaps. A Cuckoo called. Treecreepers, and woodpeckers nested, and a rare Firecrest made a brief appearance. The ancient oaks hosted a fascinating variety of insects whose delicate patterns and intricacies we viewed as never before. Orange-tip butterflies laid eggs on the abundance of Jack-by-the Hedge, Purple Hairstreaks circled an elderly Wych Elm, and so much more. We sat on a fallen tree trunk admiring Bluebells until, as the light faded, a Tawny Owl called. Homeward bound, we paused to say goodnight to the Swallows back in their summer residence at Tewin Hill Farm.

In autumn, nature, in this lovely corner of Tewin, will celebrate its fulfilment in a difficult year with a brilliant blaze of autumn leaves. Then we shall look beyond winter to a new awakening.