

# Houghton Hall Park

## January 2024 Newsletter

The Houghton Hall Park Renaissance and Renewal Project is being managed by Central Bedfordshire Council in partnership with Houghton Regis Town Council and is supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery Fund.

A slightly belated Happy New Year! A time of new beginnings and making plans for the future. The team at the park are busy preparing for the year ahead, we already have a number of events in the calendar, the big news is that we have moved the Dog Festival to May, we couldn't wait until September to see all our furry friends! Dates for all confirmed activities are on our What's On page, have a read and save the dates.

Even though there is very little to sow at the moment, Sue our Gardener has been busy planning for the coming months, have a read of her update to find out more.

It has been decidedly cold the last couple of weeks Neil, our Park Ranger, has written a very interesting article this month on how nature and wildlife in the park has to adapt. Mark, our volunteer, has also written about how we can help the birds in this cold season and also what joy they can bring.



We now have a bra bank in the visitors centre foyer, thank you to our volunteer Nicolla for the suggestion and managing the process. If you have any unwanted bras pop them in the bin when you are visiting the park. Against Breast Cancer has a recycling scheme which takes your unwanted or unloved bras and through their network of bra banks raises vital funds for pioneering breast cancer research.

Together with their recycling partners, their textile recovery project prevents these bras going into landfill before giving them a new lease of life. For every tonne of bras collected, Against Breast Cancer receives £700 to fund their research. With over 30 million women in the UK you could really help make a difference!

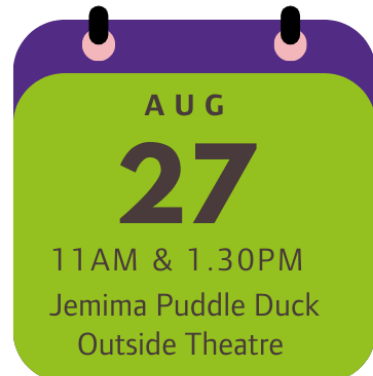
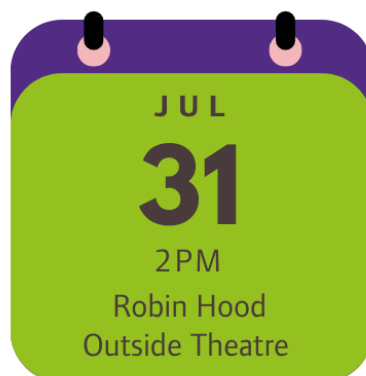
**A great place to live and work.**

## What's On

### Upcoming Events for 2024

Here's a sneak peak of what we already have planned for the year ahead, more details about these events will be coming soon!

For the latest updates follow us on facebook or instagram @houghtonhallpark.



# Monthly Photography Themes

We welcome photographers of all abilities to get creative, use your imagination and enter our monthly theme.

January's theme is: 'Woodland at Houghton Hall Park', we can't wait to see what you capture for this one, please send your submissions to:- [hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

The images must be taken between 1<sup>st</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> January 2024 and each person can submit up to 5 entries. We will not accept any overly photoshopped images that do not represent the reality of the subject in the photo. Some images will be featured on our website, social media platforms, notice boards around the visitor centre and in our monthly newsletter.

Please see our website for the full terms & conditions before you submit your work: [www.houghtonhallpark.org/photography](http://www.houghtonhallpark.org/photography)

Thank you to Mike McNamara for the photos he sent in for December's theme of 'A Touch of Frost', we love the snails cuddled up together!

Art & Culture  
**Event**

Central Bedfordshire  
**great**  
lifestyles

**January's Photography Theme**

**'Woodland' in Houghton Hall Park**

We look forward to seeing what you capture:

- Up to 5 entries per person
- Images must be taken in January
- Some images will be shown on our website, social media platforms and in our monthly newsletter
- Send them to us at: [hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)
- Deadline 31st January
- Full terms & conditions at our website

Find out more online at [www.houghtonhallpark.org](http://www.houghtonhallpark.org)

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## Community Park Ranger Update



Maybe a bit late to say it but happy new year to everyone! I hope 2024 treats you well. Now that the festivities are over you can walk in your own winter wonderland wearing the socks and knitted hats you probably got for Xmas. The woodlands and fields at this time of year look cold...and are, but with the right clothing they are a pleasure to be out and about in. Although there has hardly been any snow falling the morning frostiness has it's own beauty, the patterns formed by ice crystals on a plant or dead leaf don't cover them up like snow would but adds to and enhances the shapes and forms of nature. A frosty sunrise is sight to set you up for the day.



Although most of the trees and shrubs are bare and there are no colourful wildflowers in the park there is still plenty to see, with large mixed-species flocks of foraging birds, and mammals breaking cover to search for food. This makes winter a great time to get out into our woods and appreciate how wildlife has evolved to cope with the seasonal challenges. Most of our native vertebrate animals remain active in the winter, but with behavioural adaptations that help them cope with the harsh conditions. The challenges that plant and animal species in temperate climates face in winter are many: colder temperatures, lower food availability, frozen drinking water, reduced foraging time due to fewer daylight hours, and the risk of their bodies freezing. These challenges can pose a risk to survival for plants, and both warm- and cold-blooded animals.



Surface area reduction is one way plants and animals adapt to the colder conditions, smaller animals that would lose heat quicker than large ones huddle in groups to keep warm and deciduous trees shed their leaves partly to reduce surface area and limit water loss, it's not just to give the volunteers in the garden areas plenty of raking to do. Deciduous trees are more efficient at photosynthesis than coniferous trees, their leaves are thinner with a larger surface area. They don't keep their leaves over winter because there is much less daylight for photosynthesis and the leaves will die if frozen because the expanding water as it freezes will damage the cell walls in the leaves, keeping them would increase the risk of snow and wind damage to the tree. In the autumn, deciduous trees are triggered to start losing their leaves by shortening day length, the shedding process is called Abscission, and the abscission process is then accelerated by falling temperatures. When you impart this little gem of gained knowledge to your neighbour, hairdresser or relative don't pronounce the C.

As you know and can see there are some evergreen coniferous trees within Houghton Hall Park, these trees continue to photosynthesise all year round, even though photosynthesis efficiency is only 30% at 0°C and daylight hours are reduced in northern latitudes. At lower temperatures, the biomass gain, a renewable organic material which contains stored chemical energy from photosynthesis is so small that the trees are hardly growing. They do have a head start in the spring though, and do not have to regrow their entire foliage as deciduous trees do. Coniferous needles are highly adapted to help the tree in surviving lower temperatures. They have a small surface area and a waxy cuticle that helps to reduce water loss, and their dark colour helps to absorb warmth. The conical shape of conifers means they avoid gathering snow on their branches, and their thick bark and densely packed forests in other locations protect the trees from temperature extremes. The shape of pinecones is also adapted to help protect the seeds inside from snow.

Anyway, now that you are, if you weren't already, aware of a very small part of what goes on in winter in the park I'll bid you farewell and take care until the February newsletter.

Neil, Community Park Ranger, [neil.forder@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:neil.forder@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

## What's happening in the gardens?

Firstly, Happy New Year to our park visitors and volunteers. At the time of writing temperatures are dipping and snow is forecast to fall next week. It feels like January!



This month our volunteers are having a well-earned break from the gardens. They continued to be busy right up until Christmas helping the park team run the Christmas trail and running a successful craft stall in the Visitor Centre. Thank you to the team for working hard and to park visitors for supporting us with these fund-raising activities. Everything raised goes back to supporting ideas and projects in the park.

I've been busy ordering seeds and making plans for early spring. It is still too early to start sowing so instead it's been fun to look at seed catalogues and start to make growing plans for next year. Foremost in our minds is "What do our customers like to buy?" so we have been reviewing sales of our produce from the kiosk on Thursday mornings. It seems our customers are very traditional and like vegetables such as potatoes, beans, onions, kale, beetroot, tomatoes, leeks and cabbages. So, we will continue to grow these alongside herbs and fruit. We will continue to work with Dunstable Foodbank and provide them with produce once we are harvesting again in late spring.

New for 2024 will be a new fruit cage which will let us grow raspberries, gooseberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, rhubarb and jostaberries. Hopefully we can include white currants if we have enough space. We're also going to overhaul our irrigation system and make it more efficient; we will use a leaky hose system which will mean the hoses are buried in the ground alongside the crops. They drip water into the soil, meaning nothing is lost through evaporation, and the plants get regular water. Summer 2023 was a wet one and we didn't need to water after early September. A good irrigation system frees us up to do other tasks in the garden and deal with other challenges.



We know the allium leaf miner larvae have established themselves in the kitchen gardens as we saw the damage to our leeks and spring onions. Therefore, we will rotate our beds round and cover our plants in a protective fleece. Sadly, it's also wise to plant a few less of these plants and boost planting of other vegetables.

The warm December temperatures saw some of the seedlings we are overwintering in the polytunnel continue to grow. So, our winter lettuce is looking good and some of the bulbs and flower seeds we planted are looking strong. Our polytunnel is tucked away in a corner facing the sun, so it's the warmest place on site now!

We are looking forward to a busy 2024 and are always happy to accept new volunteers. If you are interested, please email or ring me.

Keep warm and see you in the park.

Sue Atherton

Community Gardener

[Sue.atherton@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Sue.atherton@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

## Nature Notes

By Mark Bolan Volunteer at Houghton Hall Park and Gardens

One of the world's largest citizen science projects is the annual RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch which takes place between 26<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> January. This year will be the 45<sup>th</sup> birdwatch and you can register to take part at [www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch). With climate change playing havoc with the weather and temperatures fluctuating day to day, the survey is an important indicator as to how our avian wildlife is faring. If you would like to learn more about Climate Change, then Central Bedfordshire Council in collaboration with Groundwork East is running a free online training event. For more information visit the CBC website.



*This Grey Wagtail makes several daily visits to the garden.*

In part of last month's article, I described making a wooden bird feeder, so I thought I'd mention it took less than an hour for the birds to find it and have included a picture this month.

Feeding the birds every day I have noticed a general increase in bird numbers coming to my garden. Starling numbers in particular have grown throughout

2023. The year started with one making an occasional visit for meal worms. Soon it was joined by a second bird, then a few

more. Now I can expect more than forty of them to arrive on the patio every morning. I like to top up the feeders and put the other feeds out at seven each morning. Although it's still dark, it means I can get ready for the day and have breakfast, before spending a magical 15 minutes with a cup of coffee watching the birds arrive as it starts to get light. After singing its heart out in a tree partway down the garden, declaring this is his patch, the Robin is usually the first to turn up. Robins have large eyes adapted to seeing in half-light and shady places, so often turn up whilst it is still dark. Robins are one of the first birds to nest, sometimes as early as January if it's mild, this is why you can often hear them singing

at night during wintertime as they defend their chosen territory. Great and Blue Tits are next to arrive in the old apple tree. These tend to spend time hopping about the branches in search of insects before dropping down to the feeders to grab a sunflower heart. They take it back to the security of the tree where they place the seed under a foot and peck away until they've eaten it. Some Blue Tits can be nomadic with large feeding areas which they work their way around throughout the day. So, these early arrivals may be different birds to those that come later.

The various finches on the other hand sit at the feeders taking a bite out of each seed, dropping the rest. It may seem wasteful, but it does provide for the Blackbirds and Collared Doves, who pick up the chips that drop into the grass. One Chaffinch, that has been coming daily since it was a chick last spring, has never worked out how to land on the feeders properly. With furious wing flapping it hovers, grabbing a piece of sunflower heart caught on the base plate, before flying off down the garden with it. It is surprising how many of the birds have their own personality.



*The feeder from December's Nature Notes.*



*I grow teasels for the birds.*



*Finches love teasel seeds.*



*Magpies congregating before dropping onto the patio.*



Some will only feed on their favourite feeder and push other birds out of the way to get to their preferred space. Other regulars are the Magpies who go for mealworms and will dominate the starlings when they arrive. Both



*Gulls are also daily visitors to my garden.*

species also spend time at the fat-ball feeder. One recent arrival has been a Sparrowhawk, one of the many raptors on the Birds of Conservation Amber List. At first, I was concerned it would scare off the smaller birds, but having lots of feeders, close together under the apple tree, seems to provide adequate protection for them. Although it comes in at some speed, displaying considerable flying agility, so far it has been left empty handed. Sometimes it will sit for several minutes in the



*The Sparrowhawk waits in an apple tree.*

tree, or on the top of one of the feeders in the hope of a meal, but each time the small birds have proved too agile for it. Another regular visitor, also on the Amber List, is a lone grey wagtail. This beautiful bird with its constant bobbing, pays several visits each day, feeding on niger seed and miniscule pieces of meal worm.

So, whilst I provide much needed provisions for the birds, they in return have given me my own avian wildlife zoo, with hundreds of birds arriving throughout the day.

Until next time

Mark

Volunteer at Houghton Hall Park and Gardens

## Keep in touch

### Facebook

HoughtonHallPark

### Instagram

HoughtonHallPark

### Twitter

@BedsCountryside

### Website

[www.houghtonhallpark.org](http://www.houghtonhallpark.org)

### Email

[hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

## Current Opening Times

Mon – Fri 9am to 4pm

Sat – Sun 8am to 4pm



## Become a volunteer at Houghton Hall Park

Thinking of giving something back to your local community? Then get in touch with us to see what you can do to get involved. Here are some ideas below:

- Observational Surveys
- Community engagement
- Weeding and clearing
- Cleaning
- Watering
- Growing food and encourage healthy eating
- Teach younger generations (if you have a skill or qualification, let us know!)
- Become a community leader
- Support other volunteers
- Contribute to the annual park events calendar
- Volunteering assistant at events running at the park
- Curate local history talks at visitor centre
- Habitat enhancement work in the woodland and meadow

There are many opportunities to take part. If you would like to volunteer and join the Volunteers of Houghton Hall Park, please email

[hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)



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