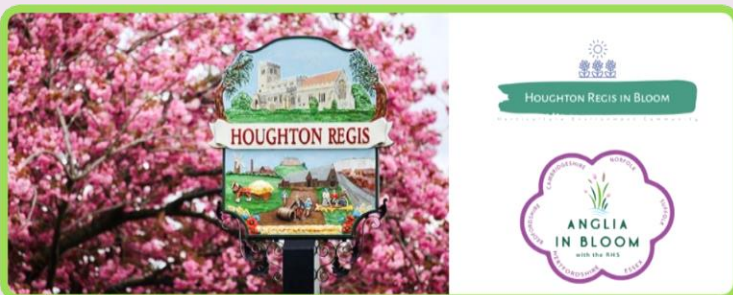


Houghton Hall Park

March 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.

We are moving into spring and looking forward to everything we have planned for the park this year, what you see when you visit the park is a combination of hard work from the Houghton Hall Park team, Houghton Regis Town Council's grounds team and of course our volunteers. Our volunteers are extremely important to us, not only in the kitchen and formal gardens but also in the wider park and at our events. We are always looking for more volunteers and volunteering is a great way to gain experience and meet new people. If you can't volunteer during the week, why not help out at one of our events or take part in our conservation tasks on a Sunday? We would be really grateful for any time you can give. Being a volunteer automatically makes you a Friend of Houghton Hall Park, this group has a great social calendar you can be involved with, they have recently been on trips to Ascott House and the theatre. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer or would like more information please contact us at hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk.



You may remember that last month we told you about Houghton Regis in Bloom, the team are hoping to impress the Anglia in Bloom judges and have started to pull together a portfolio to showcase the town, if anyone has any blooming brilliant photos of Houghton Regis that they would like to share it would really be appreciated, you can send them via the Houghton Regis in Bloom social media pages or email them to us and we will forward them on.

A great place to live and work.

What's On

Spring Wreath and Arrangement Workshops

When: Friday 22nd and Saturday 23rd March

Time: 11am Friday, 10.30am & 2pm Saturday

Cost: £28 per person

It's that time of year again and spring is definitely around the corner, an early one this year as it falls in March.



Join us at the Visitors Centre where we will be giving you the opportunity to make spring wreaths or a table arrangement with a plethora of adornments to suit your personal taste. The demonstration will take you through how to make the base before letting you loose to forage and explore the exciting materials we will have on offer. Nests, eggs, rabbits, twigs, moss, raffia, ribbons, straw foliage, carrots, hessian, dried seed heads, paper roses and so much more....



Maybe this could be booked as a Mother's Day treat, a fun day out with a group of friends or maybe just for some 'you' time. No experience necessary and open to all abilities.

Book now at:- <https://www.houghtonhallpark.org/events/spring-door-wreath-workshop>

Friends of Houghton Hall Park Spring Stall

When: Thursday 21st & 28th March

Time: 9am to 2pm

Where: Visitors Centre Foyer

The Friends of Houghton Hall Park have been busy creating some fabulous crafted items for their Spring stall, they have planted up pots of spring bulbs which are very reasonably priced and the bulbs will come up again next year. Our knitters have also created Easter bunnies which may contain a chocolate surprise, perfect for those Easter egg hunts!

All proceeds of the stall go directly back to the Friends group who use it for projects in the park which may not happen otherwise.



Xplorer

When: Tuesday 2nd and 9th April
Time: 10am to 3pm (last entry 2pm)
Cost: Free!

Enjoy a FREE orienteering outdoor adventure at our upcoming Xplorer event - the perfect activity for primary and pre-school children.

Xplorer is a fun FREE family friendly navigation challenge that gives children a sense of adventure as they explore the park to find the markers. It involves a healthy mix of physical activity and decision making that the whole family can enjoy together. Using a simple map, the aim is to find a number of markers that are located around the park. At each marker children need to identify what is pictured and enjoy learning a fun fact to tell their friends.

Pick up your map from the Visitors Centre foyer from our wonderful café team who will be running this event for us, once completed come back to the Visitors Centre to collect your certificate and sticker!



Dragon Egg Trail

When: Sunday 7th and Monday 8th April
Time: 10am to 3pm
Cost: £4 per person

Join us for an exciting dragon egg hunt this April, Olaf the ice dragon has lost his eggs in the park, can you find them before they hatch? Using your map find each egg, answer the questions and come back to the Visitors Centre to collect some treats!

Tickets cost £4 each, you can also take part in the trail for FREE but this will not include the prize.

Olaf the dragon will also be in the kitchen gardens on Sunday 7th April, do you dare meet him? Have a selfie, take part in dragon training and listen to a story, he will be in the gardens throughout the day between 10am and 3pm, this is a **FREE** activity.

Please bring a pen, something to lean on and a bag to take home your prize.

Refunds will only be given if we cancel the event.

Book now at:- <https://www.houghtonhallpark.org/events/dragon-egg-trail>



Dragon Egg and Mobile Workshop

When: Monday 8th April
Time: 10am to 2.30pm
Cost: £3 per person

Come along to the Visitors Centre and make your own dragon egg, you will be provided with a polystyrene egg, coloured pens, and array of sequins and adornments to decorate it with. Make a fabulous dragon mobile to go with your egg.



Tickets must be purchased in advance but you can attend the workshop any time between 10am and 2.30pm on Monday 8th April*

*There is a limit to the number of children we can have in the room so there may be a wait, we will work on an one in one out policy, if there is a wait the children can have fun in our play area located directly outside the visitors centre.

Book now at:- <https://www.houghtonhallpark.org/events/dragon-egg-mobile-workshop>

Buggy Fitness

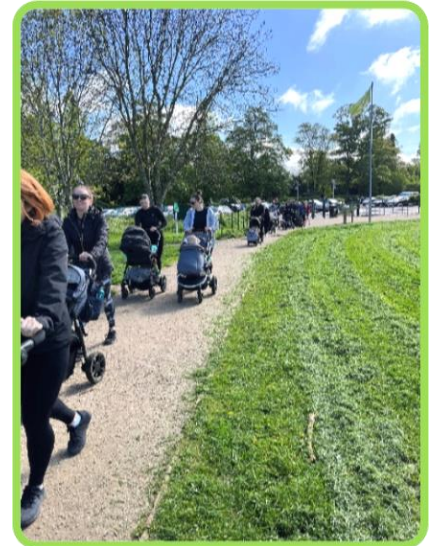
When: Every Wednesday (term time)
Time: 10am
Cost: Free!

Buggy Fitness is back for 2024! All levels welcome, the sessions consist of a warm up around the park and then an exercise circuit, older siblings are allowed in the class however they have to be in a pushchair or be able to run around the park.

New parents can get social, get fit and make new friends whilst most importantly - having fun!

To book your space go to:-

<https://www.houghtonhallpark.org/events/buggy-fitness>



Monthly Photography Themes

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

March's theme is: 'Signs of Spring' 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

The images must be taken between 1st – 31st March 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

February's theme was snowdrops and what a wonderful display we had this year!



Angela White 1



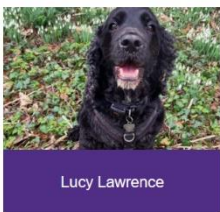
Angela White 2



Angela White 3



Angela White 4



Lucy Lawrence



Marija Mackenzie 1



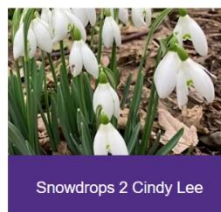
Nicolette Kapp 1



Nicolette Kapp 2



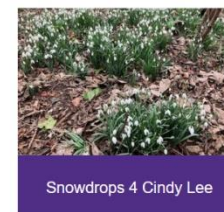
Nicolette Kapp 3



Snowdrops 2 Cindy Lee



Snowdrops 3 Cindy Lee



Snowdrops 4 Cindy Lee

Community Park Ranger Update

Greetings from the park. Spring has sprung! When my children were growing up, they tried to remember to say, “white rabbits” on the 1st of March as the first thing they would say after waking to bring them luck for the coming year, this custom has many variations with the wording and rules. It is to do with the fertile “breeding like rabbits” reputation they have and the onset of new growth and productivity. There are signs of new growth popping up all over the park, the snowdrops have gone, pretty much, except for a few late bloomers, but there is a lot more colour now. Purple Common Dog Violet, blue Spring Squill, and the yellow Lesser Celandine is still with us that I mentioned last month.

Whilst walking around the park you may have noticed some dark green arrow shaped leaves covering the ground in many parts of the park, especially the shady woodland areas...the Lords and Ladies or Cuckoo Pint amongst other names (*Arum maculatum*). It starts out in the spring, Feb-March, as a dark green arrow shaped leaf, sometimes spotty. This plant likes our chalky region so shady woodland and chalky soil explains why there is a lot of it about. Towards the end of spring what is called a spathe shoots up from the base which looks like a large leaf and when it uncurls it forms a cup or cowl shape around a Spadix. The spadix resembles a miniature bullrush, similar colour and shape. This clever little part of the plant generates heat and a cow-pat smell that attracts flies, once the flies have been lured into the hood shape they sniff out where the smell is coming from and go down through some tiny hairs which, to begin with trap the fly so it runs around collecting pollen...or deposit it from another plant, then, the tiny hairs wither so that the fly can escape to do it all over again spreading pollen like crazy. The foliage dies down in mid-summer and in the autumn a dense spike will shoot up that will develop the bright orange/red berries that a lot of people are familiar with which the birds, especially the Blackbird love. Leave this plant to the birds and flies though, all parts are poisonous to us, even the leaves can cause a rash to some people if they touch them.

These pictures show the three stages.



In the park, you may have noticed, with the help of volunteers, the trees that have been planted in various locations. The recent tree works in the park removed some dead trees and limbs plus a couple that could be dangerous to the public but now we have 200 new ones that will, in time to come, make Houghton Hall Park more biodiverse which benefits everything and everyone. If anyone is interested in volunteering to do some conservation work in the park feel free to drop me an email.

Neil

Community Park Ranger

neil.forder@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

What's happening in the gardens?

Well February was quite a month for everyone, and it was difficult to lose so many days of gardening because of heavy rain.

The impact of the rain on the gardens has been heavy. The surface of the path outside the Kitchen Gardens looks rather worn and we even had our own sink hole (now filled in!). The grass is saturated, and we've become good at manoeuvring around the huge puddles in the park! Thank you to all the park visitors who give us up to the minute weather bulletins, they are really helpful and it makes us feel that we're all in this together.

However, spring is beginning, in the warmth of the polytunnel seeds are germinating and it's great to see the green shoots of spinach, radishes, broad beans, celeriac and spring onions. Radishes get the award for germinating first, they started sprouting in early February which was great to see. We've also sown peas, wildflowers, aubergines, rocket and fennel. Out on the beds we are still spreading compost and tidying up ready for spring. We are moving things around a bit, we've reinstated a potato bed, moved the bean bed and are about to put up a new fruit cage. The soil is soaking wet and sticky, so we can't begin to sow outdoors until it becomes drier and warmer.

Visitors do ask if looking after the kitchen gardens is hard work and I do reassure them that it's not. We're fortunate to have a skilled group of volunteers to help and the 'No Dig' approach means that weeding takes place later in the spring/summer at a more manageable level. A thick layer of fresh compost on top of a weeded bed helps keep weeds in check. The raised beds are well drained, and the woodchip paths give easy access to the beds. The woodchip paths have been really useful this winter because we can hoe without compressing the soaking soil, which means we can keep on top of weeds.

A reminder that we will be growing and selling our own bedding plants this spring so look out for notices about pre-ordering your plants. They should be ready for sale by early May.

Our volunteers have been busy making Easter and Mother's Day crafts so look out for their stall every Thursday morning in the Visitor's Centre up until Easter. It sells plants and crafts at great value prices; the profits go back to help fund improvements in the park.

Early in March we revisited Ascott House and began working on their neglected kitchen garden. Underneath the weeds and nettles there is formal garden planted with box hedges and fruit trees including a grape vine. We soon settled into the task and it was great to see progress after a day's work. Paths are re-emerging, beds dug over and fruit trees pruned. We plan to return to work monthly on the garden, which is tucked away behind the greenhouses. The photographs show our amazing team of volunteers at work. Hopefully we will be able to restore the garden and it will open to the public alongside the rest of Ascott gardens.



We're keen to have more volunteers particularly over the busy spring/summer period. I'll be starting sessions for new volunteers on Wednesday mornings from April 3rd. These will run every Wednesday from 9 am to 3 pm. You are welcome to join in for a half-day session and no previous experience is necessary.

Looking forward to drier days and see you in the park.

Sue

Community Gardener/Sue.atherton@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Café Chat

And just like that another month has gone! I would just like to say thank you for keeping us so busy in the colder months we really do appreciate it. Hopefully we will have some sun soon as we enter Spring!

As you can see from the 'What's On' pages there are some exciting events coming up in the park this month, us guys at Really Awesome Coffee will be supporting the park team by running two Xplorer trails in the Easter Holidays on the 2nd and 9th April. We would like to support the park team with more events so if you do have any suggestions for new event ideas or events you would like to see again you can use our suggestion box in the Café.

This month's special is a Hunters Chicken Ciabatta, it consists of BBQ Chicken topped with 2 rashers of Bacon and Cheddar Cheese. You can have this hot or cold, we think this is best served hot.

Our Cheese and Bacon are both locally supplied by Hemel Eggs and Dairy, we like to keep our suppliers as local as possible to ensure that we can provide fresh delicious food all week long.

Any new ideas for specials or new things you would like to see on the menu make sure to use our suggestions box.

One last thing, with the evenings now becoming lighter from Good Friday, 29th March, we will be until 5pm seven days a week!

Until next month!

Mia,

Café Manager

Houghton Hall Park Café

Nature Notes

Winter is nearly behind us now with spring starting on 20th March. Not that winter has been too harsh this year, with February being the warmest and wettest since records began. Whilst this may have been nice for us humans, this unseasonal weather is a real problem for wildlife. Insects have emerged during the warm days only to be knocked back by a frost. Plants too have come into growth early, only to suffer damage from the cold nights, sporadic frosts and excessive rainfall. Birds and animals that rely on the normal seasonal explosion of food supply in spring on which to feed their young, will find it has arrived and gone. A total mismatch in the timing of supply and demand. Perhaps the most obvious signs of this, has been the number of butterflies there have been on warm days.

My bees too have been out foraging in large numbers indicating the nucleus of bees that overwinter in the hives is growing rapidly and the queen is being encouraged to lay by her attendant bees. This may



Warm days have encouraged the bees out.

seem like a good thing for a beekeeper, but it can cause problems. Firstly, there needs to be enough nectar and pollen for them to find. In winter beekeepers feed the bees by putting fondant under the roof of the hives, this replaces the honey taken off in late summer. Once the bees start foraging it becomes a balancing act of not over or under feeding. If they get more fondant than their immediate needs, the bees will put any excess into store, where the beekeeper wants them to put honey.

Early warm weather also brings the risk of early swarming and the possibility of there being enough time for subsequent swarms. Bees are

programmed to swarm and it's a natural process of bees expanding their colony. If they didn't swarm there is a danger the colony would eventually die out. Swarming normally takes place during May and June and begins with the bees raising a new queen. Scout bees will begin looking for a new home and the original queen will leave the hive with up to 60% of the bees. Initially they will collect nearby until the scout bees have democratically agreed a suitable location. Despite there being thousands of bees, swarming is when they are most

calm and least likely to sting. So, this year I'll be keeping an early eye on my hives for any sign of this dividing and take steps to prevent it. This is done by creating an artificial swarm, tricking the bees into thinking they have already divided. This way I will increase my bee stock whilst staying in control. I'll explain more about the process in a future article.

Did you know that honeybees are responsible for pollinating more plants than all the other 20,000 species of bees put together?

Over the last few weeks, I've noticed the birds coming into my garden have started pairing up.

The females playing hard to get whilst being chased by the males. As they have paired there are signs of males protecting their chosen partner. As a female feeds the male keeps guard over her, often choosing not to eat, in case another bird gets too close.

The frogs in both my own pond and in the kitchen garden have spawned. For a week or so there was a lot of activity as frogs arrived in both ponds. Each morning as I went out early to fill the bird feeders passing my pond on the way, the surface of the normally calm water seemed to boil, as lots of frogs dived for cover. Another sign spring is well on its way.

Until next time

Mark - Volunteer at Houghton Hall Park and Gardens



Bees probe the landing board while others return with pollen.



A robin enjoying some early sunshine.



The frogs have started spawning.

Friends of Houghton Hall Park



Central
Bedfordshire

great
lifestyles

Volunteers We need you!

Have you got a few hours a week to spare and would be able to contribute a little bit of time to a good community cause?

Joining our Friends of Houghton Hall Park volunteer team might just be what you are looking for!

Activities include gardening, conservation, helping at events and socialising!

As a volunteer you will also be able to take part in trips and social events organised by the Friends of Houghton Hall Park.

Contact us at hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk for more info.



Find out more online at www.houghtonhallpark.org



LOTTERY FUNDED

Keep in touch

Facebook

HoughtonHallPark

Instagram

HoughtonHallPark

Twitter

@BedsCountryside

Website

www.houghtonhallpark.org

Email

hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Current Opening Times

Mon – Fri 9am to 4.30pm

Sat – Sun 8am to 5pm



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



Central
Bedfordshire
Council



LOTTERY FUNDED