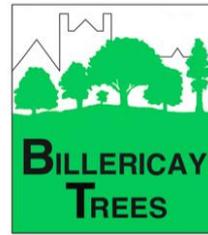


The Billericay Tree Warden's Bi-monthly News-sheet for
January 2022

News-sheets are now available to view on the Billericay Town Council's website and back issues are listed under the header "The Town". There are also tree related Fact Sheets included to advise residents. The Factsheets can also be viewed on Facebook at <https://tinyurl.com/k8bzd772>.
<https://tinyurl.com/3hxxy5m9>



Conserving Our Tree Heritage
In association with Billericay Town Council

The mature trees in our gardens, parklands and countryside and those that line our streets are our town's 'green lung' exchanging air pollution for oxygen.



Part view of the c.7,000 native trees planted by the BBC at Gloucester Park in late 2021 to combat the Climate Crisis (NH)



A cherry tree in a blaze of autumn colour in southwest Billericay (JHS)

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1] Notable Trees in our Town

Pagoda Tree – A species from China and Korea and is a rarity in the UK with examples in our arboretums. There is an old and now deformed example in the Kew Botanical Gardens that was transplanted there as a mature tree from a private estate in 1762 and thrives and flowers to this day but with several of its ageing branches supported on props! Our Billericay but much younger specimen is to be seen in a front garden down the Tye Common Road. The bark is characteristic. It superficially resembles a Robinia (False Acacia) but without its thorns and with more delicate foliage. It is also known as the Buddhist Tree.

Chinese Dawn Redwood – There is a mature and tall grove of these trees in a sunken water garden off Chapel Street. It is a deciduous conifer and grows well on moist sites. Their height is a testimony to their fast growing as the species was only discovered by western scientists in 1948 and seeds brought back for propagation. It is an example of a living fossil and prehistoric animals would have browsed its leaves. The tree is not related to the Redwoods of North America. There are also examples of this tree species in Lake Meadows.



A rare specimen of a Pagoda tree and its bark pattering

The Dawn Redwood

2] Planning Applications & Threats to Trees at 97 Chapel Street

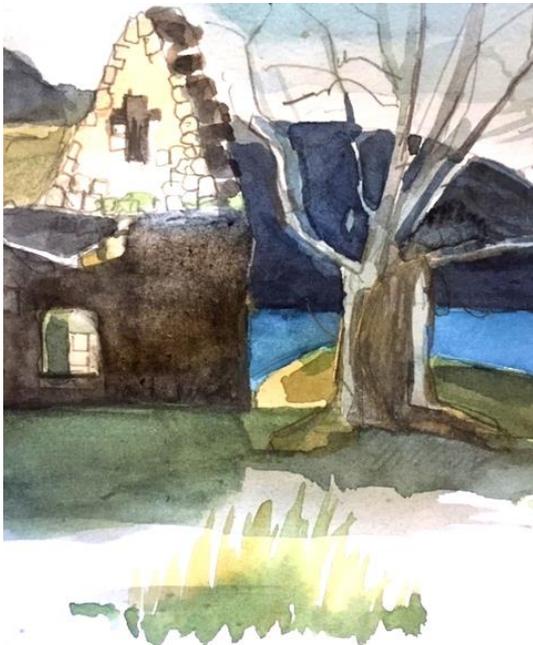
The Developer has resubmitted a PA after the initial one was refused. There is some opposition in the town to this site being overdeveloped. The BTW has pointed out that the independent tree survey commissioned by the Developer should be verified. A Basildon Borough Council (BBC) Tree Officer has visited the site and is to assess the situation and the TPO potential.

124 Norsey Road – We were called out by the BTC after a resident complained about several chestnut trees were in the process of being felled. We attended site to witness six very mature chestnut trees being actively felled. The trees did not have a TPO designation as they were on private property they could be legally felled. There are other mature trees on the property immediately adjacent to Norsey Wood and these are to remain.

Burghstead Close – Ironically the BBC asked directly for our opinion on a tall pine tree that has developed a lean towards a property. This is immediately west of the Police Station. We spoke to a resident nearby and in her opinion the tree had developed the lean over the last year. So we reported back to the BBC and relayed our findings. In our opinion the tree does represent a H&S danger. We have requested that a replacement “standard” native tree is planted as there is a convenient space for it on the embankment beside the London Road.

The Grey Lady Place

One of our member’s has been keeping a close eye on the Grey Lady Place (GLP) and its trees. There is a mature Sycamore tree next to the entrance (and constitutes a great addition to the “Street Scene” amenity aspect) that was scheduled to be felled. Upon checking with the BBC we discovered the tree is TPO designated and informed the Agent such. The GLP is where a classic mature Strawberry tree was felled some years ago. We are requesting a replacement either in the form of either a tree or in bush form.

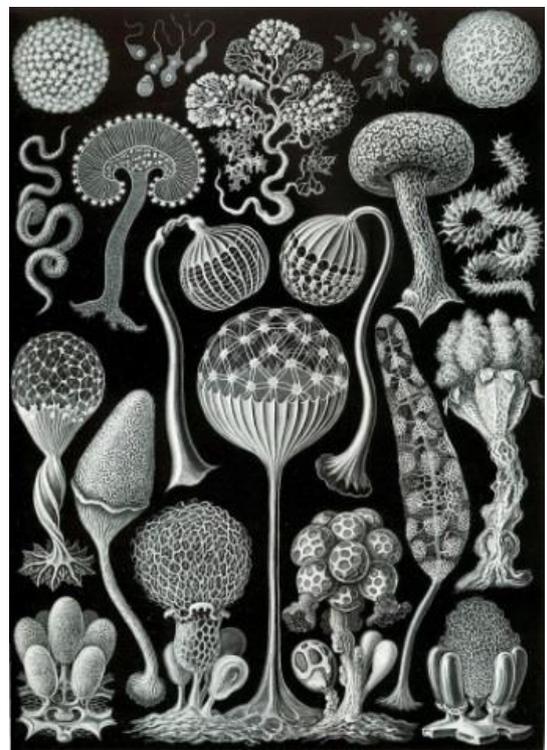


3] Artwork

One of our BTW members produces watercolour paintings of landscapes and trees. Here are two examples from her travels in Scotland. We hope to feature more examples of Trudi’s work in future News-sheets.

4] Intelligence Creeps Among a Woodland's Leaf Litter!

Welcome to the world of slime moulds! A mysterious life form with a unique lifestyle found on the woodland floor and under the bark of fallen deadwood. Biologists and mycologists know what it isn't but have not decided what it is as it does not fit into the recognized kingdoms of flora, fungi or lichen! For convenience they classify it as a Mycetozoa, a minute single cell that feeds on bacteria, yeast and fungi in the decomposing leaf litter. Here the magic of nature is demonstrated for when the food runs short the single cells have the ability to clump together and creep as a single entity a few feet away to a better hunting ground. Large examples can be a foot or two across and come in a variety of species, textures and colours. When the food runs short again they produce little fruiting bodies that release an incomprehensible number of airborne spore (similar to fungi) as the four phase complex life cycle recommences. A fundamental difference between fungi and slime mould is that the former's fruit body grows out of its host and the latter grows on its host. There are c.900 known species of slime mould throughout the world but that is surely a gross underestimation as they have been so little studied. Some shine in the night via iridescence!



Right:- Fruiting Mycetozoa under the microscope – An illustration from Ernst Haeckel's "Art Forms in Nature" - 1904.

Researchers have discovered that slime mould exhibits what we would describe as intelligence and with memory that and can even anticipate events. On a horizontal plate of glass some tempting oat flakes were placed to represent Tokyo and 36 conurbations that surround it. Then a yellow coloured net form of slime mould species was introduced. The mould initially covered the whole plate but then withdrew revealing the main connections between the cities represented by the oak flakes. This more or less duplicated the near-optimal rail network that the Japanese city planners had previously evolved between Tokyo and its satellite cities. Other bizarre experiments have been carried out with the similar result that such a primitive life form has demonstrated what appears to be an uncanny cleverness. Whatever is occurring, it appears that it is duplicating the process of a problem solving brain. But there is no central nervous system so it must be transmitting messages and instructions to itself along its network of interconnecting and pulsating veins. It has duplicated the action of 'thought' as a survival strategy.

As with fungi, unless one actively looks for them, slime mould goes unnoticed. There is an intriguing book on the subject "**The Creeping Garden**" by **Jaspar Sharp & Tim Grabham (2015)**.



Left:- *Physarum polycephalum* - The pathfinder slime mould used in behavioural experiments.

Right:- An example of a slime mould recently found in Norsey Wood. The white sphere was about half an inch in diameter across. Image courtesy of Keith Freitag.

Did You Know?

Incredible as it seems, NASA and astronomers have been using slime mould simulations to explore the mysteries of Dark Matter that supposedly holds the universe together. WW2 and the Pacific War apart, Japanese Emperor Hirohito (1901 – 1989) was the un-credited author of a book on slime moulds published in 1935. The Lister family

were pioneers of slime mould biology in the late 19th century and an interest of theirs in antiseptic surgery led to the mouthwash product “Listerine”. The strangeness continues as there is even a Slime Mould Fly!

5] Billericay Railway Trackside Trees are Under Threat Again

Network Rail (NR) intends to carry out trackside tree and vegetation removal in the Billericay area again. This was something that was commenced about three years ago and is to be revisited. This is a national H&S project to remove unsafe trackside trees from toppling onto trains, tracks and overhead cables and shedding leaves on the rails.

Needless to say, the safety of NR workers, passengers, trains and track equipment is of paramount importance. And our rail network represents the economic arteries of the nation. This is not to be disputed. But we need assurances that an OTT heavy handed approach is not to be adopted whereby the environment is unnecessarily impacted.

NR say they are to hold a “community meeting” in our town to describe the situation. We await the date, time and venue for this. We suspect their remit is already set in stone and the meeting will be to inform us of their intentions. *An initial question to be posed will be why is NR repeating this tree clearing exercise in Billericay only three years after the first clearance?*

Letters have recently been received from NR by those whose properties (“neighbours”) back onto railway property and announced their intention of tree work.

The alarm bells have rung out because there have been two infamous tree and vegetation trackside clearance operations in Hackney and Waltham Forest (pictured) in east London. The photograph illustrates the shocking *ground zero* situation where many trees and much vegetation have been completely removed. There is no getting away from the desolation incurred there. The local residents (“neighbours”) were furious at the wholesale destruction.



So is the problem more to do with a breakdown of instructions from NR to those doing the clearance? That a gross OTT approach has occurred because of the lack of communication? Something similar to this happened at Billericay Station many years ago when a swathe of mature embankment trees were felled for that very reason – It was a gross failure of management - It was a fiasco and the environment paid the price.

Professional and vetted Tree Surgeons with the correct insurances and experience need to be engaged. As we understand it, there is no national licensing system for Tree Surgeons. Thus strict vetting procedures will need to be implemented by NR as well as good lines of communication between them.

We are informed that drone video surveys are to be conducted by NR to identify the vegetation and trees that are considered to be suspect. But leaning and diseased trees will not be flagged up unless a back-up ground survey is conducted.

We are also informed that a mitigation initiative is planned whereby “trackside friendly tree and shrub planting” will replace those trees removed. But there is a risk of tokenism here. Any mitigation will need to be approved and monitored to ensure “*compliance*”.

Is Billericay unusually vulnerable to potential tree problems because of its steeply sloping embankments and deep cuttings? Especially that which skirts the southern boundary of Norsey Wood?

At the National Level

Elsewhere across the rail network there is flooding and embankment slippage due to extreme weather events now occurring in the name of the Climate Crisis. The roots of trees, shrubs and scrub make embankments and slopes safe from slippage. The roots act as reinforcement. Remove too many trees and the rotting roots allow the substrate to fill in the voids and thus trigger subsidence and landslides. The reasons for landslip is well documented.

There are c.20,000 miles of rail track nationally and millions of trackside trees. A wildlife aspect is that it represents a network of “green corridors” for wildlife to roam along and connect to the wider countryside. Environmental advice from the RSPB and our Wildlife trusts.

The Basildon Borough Council has no authority over the work to be undertaken by NR. The Forestry Commission can intervene although they say that certain aspects of NR’s work is beyond their control. However, they say that NR do not have “carte blanche” to fell indiscriminately and “restocking” will be expected. However, what is on paper will need to reflect in reality.

Closer to Home

Although NR trackside tree work is a national initiative, we need to focus on our town and how the tree work can be undertaken carefully and responsibly to not only include the overall imperative H&S considerations but also be in balance with environmental concerns.

Our Billericay Councillors and the Chairman of the BTC are already very aware of the situation. Thank you to Cllr Andrew Schrader for also pursuing this issue as shown on his website - <https://bit.ly/3pP6C8a>

We are informed that the NR trackside vegetation clearance work will begin this winter and needs to avoid the time when birds are nesting; March to August inclusive.

Meanwhile the date and time for the NR “community meeting” in a High Street location is awaited.

There is a page on the Network Rail website that gives some useful information as to why they undertake this kind of work and what they do to mitigate it:- [Vegetation management – Network Rail](#) It is apparent that this information has been written from an environmentally aware viewpoint but its advice needs to be implemented. And the clearance work needs to be independently monitored.

A shortened version of this article has appeared in the BDRA’s recent Newsletter.

6] The Proposed Solar Farms South of Great Burstead and Adjacent the Outwood Farm Road

Enso Energy held a “public consultation” down at Barleylands on Monday 8th November so residents could assess what the projects would entail. The proposed site south of the Great Burstead area and adjacent the Noak Hill Road is c.49 hectares in size and the proposed area to the NE adjacent the Outwood Farm Road is c.41 hectares. That is 225 acres o/a which converts into the size of 129 football pitches! All of the proposed solar farms are on open and treeless agricultural land. Refer to the map below.

Enso Energy’s brochure for this proposal can be seen on their website:-

[file:///C:/Users/John/Downloads/Solar%20Farm-burstead_brochure_FINAL%20\(9\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/John/Downloads/Solar%20Farm-burstead_brochure_FINAL%20(9).pdf)

An existing solar farm adjacent to the Outward Farm Road has a Planning Application Granted for it to be extended by WEL Solar Park 25 Ltd. The agricultural land where the proposed solar farms would be built on is of average fertility. Looking at Google Maps there is not a tree issue as they are sited on open farmland but they are bordered by trees and vegetation. However, there is the wildlife issue to consider.

The installation(s) would have a 40 year lifespan and then be returned to agriculture (by the rules as understood of today) to satisfy the Green Belt condition. So the BTW offers the pros and cons of the proposal as we see it and it is up to the readership to decide if such projects are suitable for our area.

Solar Panel Efficiency – Sun and Cloud - For solar panels to contribute to the National Grid, daylight is only necessary rather than specifically sunlight but their efficiency will vary accordingly. The energy they absorb comes from not just the visible light spectrum, but also from a range of different wavelengths, many of which are perfectly capable of penetrating cloud cover.

The Case Against

The land is temporarily removed from food production for 40 years before being returned to agriculture. The solar farm infrastructure itself will then be recycled. However, what with the Local Plan proposing nine extensive residential housing estates to be built in and around the town, this further intrusion into the landscape can be seen as unwarranted. It is understandable that some residents living nearby will not want it to be on their doorstep (NIMBYism). The installation will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the overall appearance of the landscape. Planning decisions do not take into account the temporary disruption that will be caused during the construction of such projects. The onsite battery storage facility would involve the mining of chemicals and minerals and their recycling plus the end of life solar panels has yet to be efficiently addressed. Would the market value of existing houses be negatively affected if a solar farm were built close by? Further, will the Public Rights of Way (PROW) be respected?

The Case For

If one is of the COP26 mindset then such a project satisfies the urgent need to convert our energy policies to sustainable energy production. This is seen as a trade-off between the green energy sector and an intrusion into the local landscape. There is a study by the RSPB on solar farms with respect birdlife. It points towards providing a better habitat for wildlife than intensively farmed agricultural land. The land would not be subject to the wildlife poisoning effect of repeated applications of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/science/posts/bird-use-on-solar-farms-final-results>

A joint study by the York and Lancaster Universities also supports that conclusion.

Other plus points are – Solar farms provide employment for the green community and are highly efficient for reducing society's carbon footprint by not relying on coal, oil and gas.

Wildlife Advantages of Solar Farms over Open Agricultural Land:-

The continuous enhanced native hedge planting around the installations to act as a screen is good for wildlife. The land is taken out of agricultural production and thus would not be sprayed with wildlife inhibiting pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. This has led to a catastrophic decline of farmland birds due to the food chain being seriously disrupted. The rows of solar panels will have rides between them to allow for vegetation to flourish. The fencing keeps people out and the area within remains quiet and undisturbed for wildlife to thrive. The boundary fencing should include small holes for mammals and amphibians to access. Ground nesting birds can nest undisturbed if the mowing regime is mindful of that. Introduced sheep will only graze the areas that they can reach. The absence of heavy farm machinery will not cause soil compaction. The meadow flowers (specifically planted and those naturally occurring) are good for bees, butterflies and other insects generally. A solar farm can foster good habitat requirements for Skylarks, Yellowhammers and bats etc., which are already in the area. This attracts the birds of prey to hunt there that demonstrates that the top-down food chain is operating. In our opinion, there needs to be an adequate proactive management plan for the vegetation within and immediately outside the solar farm perimeter to maintain and maximize its wildlife value.

Further Aspects

The problem that is seen to occur with these installations is that they are constructed by one company and then sold on to a maintenance company for the 40 years duration. From experience it is found that the original biodiversity enhancements that were detailed in the original specification are not always fully followed through by these maintenance companies. This omission is compounded by the fact that the Basildon Borough Council (BBC) does not check for “*compliance*” with respect biodiversity enhancements being put into effect.

However as a caveat to that, BBC Planning are of a mind to waive the need for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for these particular solar farm Applications. Hence the wildlife and landscape considerations would not need to be considered.

There is a facility on the BBC's Planning Portal to enter a "Comment" on a Planning Application that one can express a view as to **For** or **Against**.



Map reproduced from Enso Energy data

We would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to various BBC and BTC Councillors who support our goals along with those local experts with specialist knowledge that have advised the BTW in various technical matters

A thank you must go to the Billericay Town Council for providing the BTW with advice, a meeting room at the BTC's Chantry Centre, moral support and Personal Liability and Personal Accident insurance whilst out in the field

**The BTW's next members' committee meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 2nd February 2022 at 6pm
Unless otherwise stated, we are to opt for a Zoom meeting**



Prepared by the Billericay Tree Wardens [Editor JHS – 2nd January 2022]

Contact = billericaytreewardens@gmail.com

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