

The Billericay Tree Warden's Bi-monthly

News-sheet for April 2024



Conserving Our Tree Heritage
In association with Billericay Town Council

Our News-sheets are available to view on the Billericay Town Council's website including back issues and are listed under the header "The Town". There are also tree related Factsheets included to advise residents. The Factsheets can also be viewed on Facebook at <https://tinyurl.com/k8bzd772> <https://tinyurl.com/3hxdy5m9>

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1] If You Go Down to the Woods Today – It May Not be There! [A story that needs to be told]



Although in itself not an illegal act, the felling of a large area of ancient woodland in a private garden in early 2022 that effectively formed part of Norsey Wood (NW) was a thoughtless and irresponsible act. There had been no consultation with the Norsey Wood Society (NWS) who have voluntarily partnered and shared the Wood's management duties with our Basildon Council since the mid-1970s to maintain the Wood as a flagship Nature Reserve (with SSSI status) and to provide a popular public amenity. Ferrari owning and anti-wildlife gap-site Developers recognize that houses built on the periphery of the

Wood (and in this case within it) command high prices for such a prestigious location but fail to respect or give back to the environment. The Billericay Tree Wardens (BTW) have crossed swords with such moneymen before who "*push the envelope*" to maximize their profit. *The BTW are wise to it – In the past there has been no one to highlight this money-orientated destructive behaviour – There is now.*

What had further added to the insult of the situation was that when the BTW had been on site earlier, we had been assured that the ancient woodland in the garden would **NOT** be felled. A week later, and almost as if overnight, over a third of an acre of mature trees were gone and the root stock groundout. – Clearly coppicing had not been on the agenda. The photograph "*An Open Sky and Woodchips*"! depicts the scar (and all too clearly shown on Google Maps if not from space!) has now gone into woodland mythology.

So what was to be done? Our Local Authority (LA), powerless in terms of the law, have expressed their displeasure by not granting the Developer Planning Permission until he carries out a reparation exercise – That is by replanting "*heavy standard*" sized native trees as replacements where the original trees had been. Presumably these would then be designated with a Woodland TPO with a long-term management plan.

Our LA also responded to our request that the neighbouring seven long gardens, still blessed with their intact Ancient Woodland, were all designated with Woodland TPOs; collectively some three acres in extent. An expensive process involving a large amount of Tree Officers time that requires detailed site surveys backed up by much behind the scenes legal work and historical searches.

As a knee-jerk reaction, Gap-site Developers (who are often masters of the Anglo-Saxon invective) will without hesitation fell **ALL** non-TPO trees and vegetation on a building site and are reluctant to temporarily

protect TPO trees with root and trunk protection from damaging site operations as per they are legally bound to do.

All Developers are soon to be subject to a new government law of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) whereby it is beholden of them to provide their sites with a 10% net gain of wildlife than the site originally had. However, the Norsey Road development site had suffered a traumatic Biodiversity Net Loss!

Back in 2019 a gap-site Developer excelled himself at a property known as “Minstead” along the Deerbank when he oversailed the NW woodland boundary by many square metres (and trimmed back woodland trees without permission) but at the time it was considered too small a violation to warrant legal action. An example of where the *“envelope had been successfully pushed”*!

The BTW is a subgroup of the Billericay Town Council (BTC) and together we have thanked our LA, and the various well-meaning individuals for their sympathetic and helpful advice to this blatant and unwarranted attack on our town’s tree heritage.

Please note that the larger mainstream Development companies normally conduct themselves in a professional manner and are not to be confused with the smaller and more guileful gap-site Developer that the above article refers to.

2] The BTW at the “Community Open Day” Event at the Chantry Centre – Friday 22nd March 2024

For the second year running the BTW staffed a table at the Chancery Centre where we met members of the public who were curious as to our role or wanted advice in relation to tree issues. We had laid out various pamphlets that described our role in the community for the taking. We were in good company as we were sandwiched between the Norsey Wood Society and the Mill Meadows Society both of which we have strong links with. This year we had organized a Roller Banner with our BTW logo illustrated to advertise our presence! The event was attended by at least 20 local voluntary groups that operate in the town that represent various themes from hobby interests, the arts, keep fit groups to mental health issues. This event is a golden opportunity to showcase how the volunteer sector of our town *“gives back”* in kind what the town provides for our residents. Thanks to our Fiona for her organizational skills, to Neil and Dr Nigel for helping to staff the table and relating to the visitors. This event has now become a regular annual event on the BTW calendar!



3] The Local Plan - Our Landscape - Our Trees – Our Wildlife - The politics and the practical aspects of the Local Plan, ongoing for many years with successive revisions, is a very controversial and contentious issue with as many differing views as there are those ready to voice them. In some areas, our countryside and its landscape, its trees and our wildlife are under threat from considerable residential housing development. Some development sites are on open farmland free of trees whereas others have many characterful veteran oaks that form part of an area’s tree heritage and its landscape. Illustrated is a “stag-headed” oak indicating its great age and veteran status. Some of these are in lines indicating ancient boundaries between estates and fields.

The risk has been that once the Developer comes into possession of the land, either he (or the original landowner) could fell all the trees prior to a Planning Application (PA) being submitted. Some Local Authorities counter that mindless threat by requiring a Developer to undertake an independent tree survey at his own expense that would appear on the PA so the results could be discussed between Planning and Developer to agree on a compromise as to what trees should remain and what could be removed.



A Developer may prefer trees to be felled as that exposes more footprint for house building. However, an inhibiting factor to this tree loss is the recent government's introduction of the Biodiversity Net Gain law (BNG) that imposes upon the Developer to increase the wildlife on his development site by 10% more than it originally had. To this end, the Developer will need to hire a professional ecologist to advise on how to achieve this mandatory requirement. Thus retaining existing trees and hedges on a development site would mean that there is less to add to achieve the 10% net gain. A plus point is that Developers usually like to retain the boundary hedgerows and its trees to provide a visual and sound screen to their new build residential development and will also plant up the gaps to achieve this.

A formula that is ecologically recognized to combat the Climate Crisis is to maintain mature trees but also to introduce a "soft landscaping" scheme. This dual purpose approach allows for the mature trees to continue delivering their "natural services" of absorbing air pollution and exuding oxygen (thus reducing respiratory problems for humans) and introducing "soft landscaping" planting that in the future will be mature enough to make a contribution by providing their own "natural services" to the mix.

However, a complication has arisen concerning BNG that at present there is not a system of checking for "compliance" in place; that is what the Developer has listed as wildlife additions within his granted PA have been implemented by him on site. At the moment, this is a national problem without a solution but considered opinion is that it is better to have BNG than not to have BNG as the onus is still on the Developer. Those areas that are already blessed with an extensive tree stock, in private gardens, in Parks and Nature Reserves, in woodlands and across the countryside, on ECC verges & Local Authority land and planting within future developments, act as a "Green Lung" providing fresh air, summer cooling and shade for its residents – Estate Agents are well-aware that houses set among trees demand keen house prices, reduce energy bills and are thus sort after. An inescapable fact is that when arable farmland is given up for development, the land is no longer drenched in pesticide and herbicide chemicals, the very actions that has decimated the insect and farmland bird populations across much of our landscape in arable areas. Needless to say this article does not address the controversial Green Belt issue and the new infrastructure required throughout the town to justify large scale development.

4] Tree Planting at the Woodvalley Vineyard Adjacent to Norsey Wood by the Outwood Common Road.



Having been given the "grand tour" by proprietor Keeley Harris and her team of Kevin, Jay & Alison of the Woodvalley organic vineyard back in 2023, Billericay BTW Tree Warden Nathan had offered to supply 150 native trees from the Norsey Wood tree nursery to help supplement the biodiversity and wildness of the project.

So on the 9th March this year the BTW and volunteers met up on site to carry out the planting. Over time, neither the pandemic nor the potential problems with seeking Planning Permission, or the business dynamic changes had deterred Keeley and her team's keenness for progress. The business venture combines combatting the Climate Crisis with improving the local area for wildlife and will eventually provide local employment in the vineyard.

The effects of Climate Change have now meant that the SE of the UK and its ideal wine growing soils are ideal for commercial wine production. A preserve for many years held by the French but now their climate has changed such that they are looking to the UK for their source of quality grapes. The vision is that in a few years' time there could be more highly profitable vineyards in and around Billericay producing quality wines by local growers.

The vineyard now has a website that can be accessed by referring to www.woodvalleyvineyards.co.uk where the passion for the project shines through. Proprietor Keeley Harris is pictured 3rd in from the left with BTC Cllr Chris May with spade standing next to ecologist Nathan Hume in Hi-Viz yellow.

It's a big thank you to all the experienced tree planting volunteers as it truly is a case of many hands make light work. A novel thought springs to mind that perhaps if we were to have less Local Plan new build development sites in the immediate area and a few more vineyards, many would drink to that! A project where business and wildlife will both prosper.

5] Billericay Ward Revision after the May Elections 2024

As indicated on the Billericay Action Groups (BAG) website, the Basildon Borough is going through an electoral review and due to that process some Ward boundaries will be revised. This will effect our Wards in Billericay. So the BTW's Planning Application checking team will need to work to a new map and its revised Ward boundaries after the May elections.

6] Addendum

With reference to our News-sheet for January 2024. It has been pointed out that our mention of 2765 new build houses destined for the Billericay area was based on the superseded Local Plan and not necessarily a reference to the number that will be opted for in the expected revised Local Plan.

We would like to say thank you to the various BBC and BTC Councillors who support our goals and those "Friends of the BTW" (FoBTW), who's anonymity we respect, who offer their technical advice and practical support when called upon via their empathy for trees and wildlife

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 & Personal Accident insurance for BTW members and their volunteers, whilst out in the field with no geographic restriction

We take this opportunity to thank the company of S H Goss & Co Ltd that has generously provided the use of equipment, materials, transport & Nathan's time for BTW's planting projects

The Billericay Tree Wardens are a voluntary group and all information contained therein is not legally binding and is provided as a source of advice and information only

The BTW's next members' Committee Meeting is scheduled for

Wednesday 8th May 2024 at 7pm

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