

The Plot So Far...

Newsletter of South Harpenden Allotments and Gardens Society...Spring 2024

From the Chairman



We seem to be rushing into 2024 at full speed and with that very cold spell in early January; spring arrived soon after with a proliferation of snowdrops appearing early, and even early daffodils were seen near Whipsnade Zoo in bud before the end of the January. *The Plot So Far* corresponds with our rent renewal time and pre-pandemic we collected the annual rents over two or three Sundays in March and issued a hard copy of our magazine. It was the late Irene Boogerman, former editor, who instigated the online version. We were sorry to hear of her death last April; then again, we lost our former Secretary Roger Glanville in October ... R.I.P.

The allotment Society receives an annual grant from Harpenden Town Council, which goes towards our running costs plus the income from letting our 400 plots. Our annual rent, around £30 for an average plot remains markedly good value, bearing in mind the free water, free fuel for the wide range of equipment available, with mowers, strimmers and cultivators, and their added cost of maintenance and repairs. We also receive an annual maintenance budget which we use to fund site repairs, tree maintenance, fencing and boundary repairs and some of the building work at our PH headquarters. This year there have been new fencing contracts for the old chain link fencing at PH, a new wooden fence at CF at the back of the Co-op car park, and planned is the levelling off of much of the stone embankment at OR, which is almost as high as the existing fence. A new shed is required at CF in the near future.

Our petrol machinery is being replaced with Stiga battery-powered equipment, which has proved popular with most ploholders, but we continue with charging problems, with only our PH site having a mains electricity supply. Additional machines are currently on order for the forthcoming summer season.

Steve Case took over running the allotment shop last summer and has settled into the routines of stock ordering and guessing what will be required. The seed potatoes this year were from a new supplier and went on sale in mid-February, so there should still be some available when you read this page.

This will be my last year as SHAGS Chairman, but I shall continue as a site rep for a while longer, so I give my successors my best wishes for the future, looking after our great team of Officers and our hard working site reps and helping all of our 400+ members

Mike Cobley

Awards

Congratulations to everyone who won awards for their plots last year, and thanks to Linda Gahagan who organised the whole thing so efficiently.

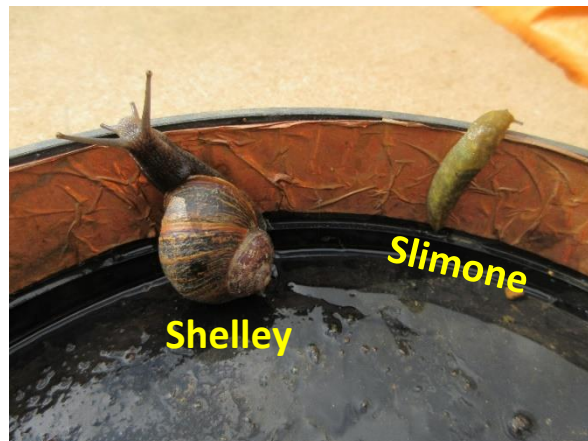
It takes a lot of hard work even just to grow a little food, let alone achieve competition standards. If you would like your plot to be considered for an award, you can find out the judging criteria on our SHAGS website, where all is explained. The plots are judged each July.

The Chairman's Shield for best plot went last year to John Jones's family plots at Topstreet Way. Here are a couple of John's photos taken a little earlier in the year. A lesson to us all!



The photo competition also produced a worthy winning entry – here (left) is a reminder of Mike Lawford's excellent picture of a rainbow over Topstreet Way allotments, which was also judged "Best Site" in 2023. They must be doing something right at Topstreet Way.

Does Copper Tape Form an Effective Barrier Against Slugs and Snails?



The answer would appear to be a simple 'no' from this experiment with my pet snail, Shelley, and slug, Slimone. In this experiment I put a circle of copper tape around the inside of a large plastic plant pot saucer, placed Shelley and Slimone in the centre, then watched to see if the tape acted as any deterrent to their escape. No, it didn't, even after rubbing the tape with fine wire wool to remove any surface oxidation (good suggestion, Clive).

But things are never quite 'black and white'. When I repeated this experiment with other slugs and snails, some did seem to be deterred by the tape for a while, and they crawled round and round in seemingly endless circles, but eventually all went 'over the top'.

A good comparison would be if you were placed in a field surrounded by a barbed wire fence. This might act as a deterrent for a while, and you might well look for an easy exit, like a gate. But if there was no alternative, you would eventually escape, albeit with a bit of difficulty, 'over the wire'.

I conclude that if there are 'easier pickings' for slugs and snails, copper tape might encourage them to 'move on', so it might provide some protection. So, as the results were a bit inconclusive, I reckon, as does every research scientist, that this topic 'needs more research'. Ideal topic for a school science project, perhaps?

How about course grit? This acted as no deterrent at all in my experiment with Slimone. It (and that is the correct terminology, as Slimone likes to be identified as hermaphrodite) went straight over a test barrier as shown. Shelley was not put off either.



Important Postscript: No slugs or snails were harmed in the course of these experiments. As Shelley and Slimone had been so cooperative in my research project, I decided it would be a bit heartless to submit them to the usual fate of slugs and snails on my plot – poisoning with pellets or crushed underfoot. No, I released them safely back into the wild. But on the neighbouring plot, of course...

Stephen Moss, Topstreet Way 27

Waiting at the Gates

When I took on the site rep role at Topstreet Way I didn't realise how much time would be spent waiting around at the entrance gate ready to receive various deliveries.

First in the spring there was the arrival of a load of slabs and ton bags of ballast for the foundations of the new shed. I still remember saying to the driver that he should put the latter anywhere over the gate that he felt comfortable – and then stood back and watched as, it seemed almost in slow motion, he swung one right through the neighbour's fence.

It took a few months and several calls to Wickes to get them to eventually pay for a new fence panel.

There was no problem with any fence destruction on the next delivery as the expected shed kit never turned up. By the time I had given up lying on the grass, gate-side, for an hour past the agreed time and contacted the company, their lorry was apparently somewhere in North London and so it all had to be re-arranged.

When the shed kit did arrive the next week, I was ready to take what I anticipated would be a series of large boxes of components - only for the driver to offload just two worryingly small packages onto the pavement. I wasn't the only one on site who thought that somehow I'd ordered a kiddies' style item by mistake. The mickey-taking only stopped when miraculously a week later it did indeed assemble into a full-sized shed!

The final delivery, in the autumn, was the most entertaining. Four times we had to throw ourselves in the way of oncoming traffic to stop them long enough to allow the tractor / trailer combo bringing our manure to reverse back round through the entrance. An early-afternoon arrival estimate proved overly optimistic and so eventually the first visit hit bang in the middle of the afternoon school run. There was the consolation that a lot of car-carried young families found out while in the sizeable queue either side that (if they didn't know before), the gap in the houses they passed untroubled so many times before, actually led to somewhere agriculturally significant!

By the final two loads we were still blocking traffic, but it was now in the dark. The fact that the tractor driver was now going faster backing the trailer up the entrance way in the deteriorated lighting conditions made me increasingly worried for the safety of the neighbour's repaired fence. But thankfully superior driving skills ensured this time no sudden adverse rearrangement befell any boundary structure.

After all that, I look forward to more gate-waiting opportunities next year!



..... and, literally, the moment after I took this photo, the rapidly swinging bag crashed through the fence in the foreground!

Mike Lawford, Topstreet Way 17,18

Can Anyone Beat My Cuddly Toy Collection?



These cuddly toys were all found around my Topstreet allotment during 2023. When the first ones appeared, I assumed that children in a neighbouring garden had thrown them over the fence, so I threw the toys back. That prompted the immediate appearance of a hostile face demanding to know if I had just thrown something into her garden. So, I didn't bother after that experience and my collection grew.

It seems now that the culprit is the local fox, which is why some of the toys are dismembered. I did discover, eventually, that most of these were dog's toys and were left out in the garden from where the fox could readily pinch them at night. Most were returned to the grateful owner – and, presumably, dog. But the purple, sequined-covered owl has reappeared at least twice since then, so I keep chucking it back over a fence. Hopefully, into the correct garden.....

Stephen Moss, Topstreet Way 27

Top Fruit Moth Control

Apples, pears, plums etc. suffer from the depredations of the larvae of various moths, which lay their eggs either directly on or in the fruit, or in the bark of the tree. The larvae feed within the fruit and can render them inedible. There are numerous images of the various adult moths, their larvae, and affected fruit on the web. Traditionally, such fruit trees were treated with 'tar' washes, particularly of the trunk, so as to kill or discourage climbing larvae. So-called 'grease bands', which can be wrapped around the trunk to trap climbing larvae, are also popular. More recently, pheromone-based traps have been developed which use a chemical that is attractive to the adult moths. These fly into the trap in search of the source of the pheromone BEFORE the eggs are laid, and are caught on what is, in effect, a fly-paper. There is much discussion about which of these methods is effective in protecting top-fruit. For several years, we have tried the pheromone-based trap that targets the plum fruit moth (*Grapholita funebrana*), in order to protect the fruit of our heavily-cropping 'Opal' plum tree. The trap is hung in the tree in May. The results for summer 2023 are shown in the image below (the small red capsule contains the pheromone). We found very few plums affected by larvae. The kit for this trap is sold in the Allotment Shop (which also sells a similar kit targeting the apple codling moth). We have no recent experience of tar washes, grease bands and similar products.

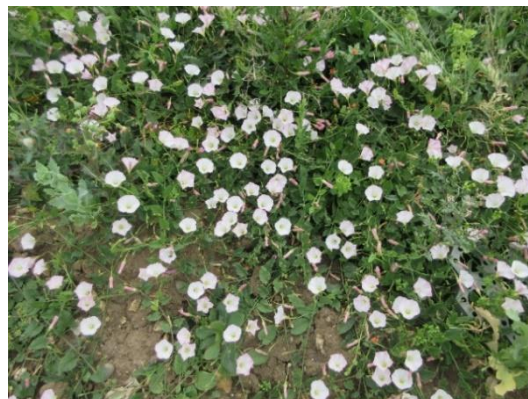


Peter and Helen Loveland, Sibley Avenue 10

Trapped adult moths

My Favourite Weed: No 1. Field Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*)

This attractive weed is clearly popular with many allotment holders, given the amount that can be seen around the different sites..... It is a perennial plant with trailing stems spreading up to 2 m and has pretty pink and white flowers. But what makes it a really **great** weed is the depth of the root system, which can reach several metres, it is claimed. While such claims may be exaggerated, what is certain is that the roots commonly extend deeper than any realistic digging depth. Hence, attempts to dig plants out simply break off the deeper roots which then regrow to produce new plants. 2023 was a particular good year for this attractive weed, probably because its deep rooting habit meant it was less affected by the long dry period during late spring in 2023 than shallower rooting weeds.



How to eradicate field bindweed. While repeated cultivations/digging/hoeing can be effective by gradually depleting food reserves in the plant, this approach needs discipline and persistence to be effective. Observation of plots leads me to conclude that this 'discipline and persistence' is sometimes lacking... Glyphosate will give much more reliable control and is usually more effective when the weed is well developed, or even flowering. Early spring applications are generally less successful as there is insufficient foliage for effective uptake. Glyphosate will kill most living plants, including vegetables, so targeted spraying of the weed is required to prevent 'collateral' damage. Glyphosate is not active via the soil, so good coverage of the foliage is essential.



A field bindweed plant about to be sprayed with glyphosate on 1 July 2023



Same plant 19 days later — completely dead — and it won't regrow

Note: my plot was badly infested with field bindweed when I took it on, but it is now close to being a 'bindweed free zone'. And I owe it all to good old glyphosate....

Stephen Moss, Topstreet Way 27

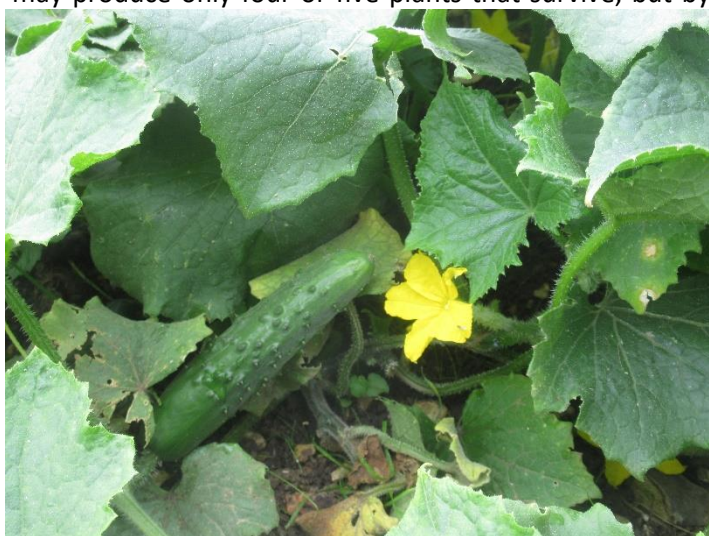
Cucumbers Galore

Years ago, I grew courgettes. And they grew, and grew, and grew. Enough was enough. I could not deal with such abundance and gave up. Instead, I turned to outdoor cucumbers. I suppose most people grow or buy those long glasshouse-grown cucumbers, and use them in summer salads, or in thin, crustless posh sandwiches. Not necessary. Outdoor-grown, gherkin-like cucumbers can be just as good, in my opinion, and easier to grow (if you don't have a glasshouse).

For quite a long time I was disappointed, though. The varieties I tried all seemed to be bitter. Then I discovered, by chance, Marketmore 76, a well-established variety. It is not bitter at all and makes a perfectly good salad cucumber. It is also versatile. Anything you can do with a courgette, you can do with this cucumber. You can fry it, boil it, freeze it, or whatever. Some of our surplus goes into the freezer and later forms the basis of interesting soups.

Marketmore is also perfect for making "sour cucumber", a winter staple in Eastern European countries. It was an especially valuable, vitamin-rich winter vegetable in the days when fresh vegetables were unobtainable in winter. It is made by allowing fermentation in salty water by naturally occurring lactobacteria (producing lactic acid), in almost the same way as sauerkraut is made from cabbage (we do that too). As well as the product being highly nutritious (unlike pickled vegetables, which are not), their live beneficial bacteria make a wonderful contribution to the digestive system. The taste of sour cucumbers takes some getting used to, but they can then become almost addictive. The fermentation takes only a week or two, after which they can be kept for a short time, fully submerged in the fermentation liquid, preferably in a fridge. They can be kept much longer in the less humid conditions of Eastern Europe. In this country, where the humid air is more heavily populated with mould spores, sour cucumbers exposed to the air can become mouldy, soft and inedible after a few weeks. Even so, our Marketmore cucumbers, fresh or soured, are better quality than many of those currently available at any Polish market.

I usually start off my cucumber seedlings in seedling compost in a cold frame, and plant them out when they have at least two or three proper leaves and are growing vigorously. Seeds can go straight into the ground if necessary; either way, I find seedling survival is usually quite poor. A packet of seeds may produce only four or five plants that survive, but by mid-summer those few will be providing



dozens of nice little cucumbers, which can be picked almost daily. They need to be protected from slugs and snails at all times, of course. They will also need water, but it is best to avoid getting water onto the flowers as they may rot before the fruits form. The plants, now spread over quite a large area (directed by careful use of sticks), will start to die-off around the end of August.

Developing cucumber and flower, 2023

Geoff Bateman, Piggottshill 135, 136A

As I See It - Pulling the Finger Out

“Ah say, Richard”, Charlie confided to me recently in that squeaky Hertfordshire voice of his, “hasn’t this weather we’ve been having recently.....”

“I expect so”, I replied when he had stopped talking a few minutes later (not having bothered to follow his drift as I was in a hurry to get my weeding done before rushing away to the Cross Keys pub for my weekend pint).

I had obviously given him the right answer, for he was off again, leaning on a fork, stopping only to light a roll-up with that cigarette lighter of his which he had made out of an old 303 cartridge case he had kept since the end of the Second World War.

“And, the price of vegetables today.....”. Yes, I thought, Mrs Thatcher and her proposed 5 per cent reduction in living standards meant that I would probably be applying to the Allotments Committee next year for another 10 rods on which to grow my tobacco.

“The trouble is today that too many people want something for nothing.” “Ah say”, he confided again, “people will soon have to pull their fingers out”. And, suddenly he had hit it and I went into myself once more.

It was the Duke of Edinburgh who in the early sixties (while I was still a schoolboy) was accredited with the remark that the Daily Express was a “bloody awful newspaper”. He also said that Britain should “get its finger out”. Several notables joined him in this latter call; it was a fact that those who shouted the loudest for the finger to be extracted were most often the cause of the finger being there anyway - the Government for instance. When I say “the finger being there”, I must confess that I did not know the place from which we were exhorted to removed it.

It also seemed questionable what good cause could have come from removing an embedded finger. From our childhood, we had been taught to view such an action with great caution - after all, hadn’t the little Dutch boy saved Holland from flooding by keeping his finger well into the sea wall? At the time, one supported the theory of anti-materialism, which, it might be thought, would lead one to put a higher value on a world in which the finger had not been removed.

There were also those who criticised these exhortations to greater effort on the grounds that, if they were to be taken seriously, it would imply that currently there was deliberate sabotage of the National Effort taking place, which, in most people’s experience, wasn’t the case. Another more trivial objection was to the linguistic violence of this phrase used as an encouragement, leading to the use of coarser expressions of a similar nature by the lower denizens of society - who found it hard to resist this offered chance to ape, and indeed exaggerate, this one regrettable example from the normally more graceful speech of those above them.

Dear reader, you will, I am sure, agree with me when I mention that the Englishman, and his brothers, have long believed that self-praise was no recommendation; they have made sure that they undersold their achievements in each and every sphere. By this peculiar but deliberate attitude towards world affairs, they have been distinguished the world over; their apparent lethargy meant that in an emergency there was a reserve of untapped strength which has carried them through each successive crisis. I think it is true to say that it has been commonly felt that the release of the finger would be both against the sentiment of the national character, and even a grave strategic error in the continuing battle for national survival - a proposition in direct contradiction to extra effort.

Working with one hand, the other cunningly concealed, had provided us - and the world - with the first steam-engine, the first jet-engine and the first television, and had given us the only true bastion of freedom without demanding the last pint of blood from the dying victim. No-one had felt ashamed to cry *Non digitum extractum* with that fine disregard we Britishers had for foreigners and their language, however moribund.

"I say, Charlie, it was more than seventeen years ago when they last said it, and they are still trying to tell us to pull it out", I suddenly mumbled. "As I see it, nothing much has changed. No mealy-mouthed politician's going to budge us".

"I expect so", said Charlie, pruning his raspberries.

Richard White, Harpenden Rise 33

Dryboots

These might be of interest to plot holders – this is a photo of my pair, bought a few years ago. I've been very impressed by them. Particularly good in 'wet grass' situations as they are waterproof and, being natural rubber based ('vegan friendly' – ugh), are largely 'maintenance free'. Comfortable too on longish, country walks (8 miles or so) but less suitable than leather boots for rough mountain walking/scrambling.



'The Dryboot is well proven as one of the best waterproof boots, made for situations that call for a short, lace-up waterproof boot, rather than a cumbersome knee length welly. The integral steel shank built into the sole gives superior strength for heavy digging or when walking over rough terrain. First produced in 1953, the material quality, design, styling, construction and production process has remained unchanged throughout its long lifetime - a testament to its success.' Cost? Currently £81.99.

See following website: <https://thedrybootcompany.com>

Stephen Moss, Topstreet Way 27

Pottering Around Piggottshill 2023

There was, apparently, a very cold snap in winter 2022/3 (I was away). It killed quite a lot of garden shrubs, including the bee-favoured hebe in front of our pond by the Ted Allen Room. Then came a very wet early spring, followed by a warm dry early summer (early morning watering - just me and the muntjac at Piggottshill), then a cool damp July, a mixed August, and a record-breaking hot September. All of this affected our crops in ways unique to 2023.

Weed Spotting

Like Stephen (see above), and with due deference to his far greater knowledge, I also have my favourite weeds. Unlike his favourite nasty ones, however, mine are the shallow-rooted, easily plucked ones, such as the small snapdragon known as sharp-leaved fluellen, which I allow to decorate my plot to a limited extent. In contrast, my nomination for “Weed of the year 2023” is red dead-nettle. Like my last year’s selection (corn salad, which is still spreading at PH), it is an early, not especially harmful weed, and not too difficult to remove by hand. It was particularly noticeable last year, occupying extensive neglected areas of plots in spring. These large areas eventually turned pale and then died off, with fewer individual plants flowering throughout the summer.



Opium poppy grows patchily as a weed in some PH plots. Don’t get too excited: I’m sure it is not a strain that produces any significant opium. I try and collect as much seed as possible, for use in baking.



It is the main ingredient for filling traditional Polish Christmas cakes, and quite expensive to buy. It is also supposed to be very good for the digestive system. Late in 2021 I threw some collected seed onto a corner of one of my plots, hoping to get a small crop in 2022. Nothing happened. But then they germinated in 2023, having spent a whole year waiting. Perhaps that is normal. Another mystery of nature.

Left: Opium poppies in flower, with an unusual red form

Pest and Disease Spotting

We need more of those cold snaps in winter, but they are unlikely now that we have thoroughly wrecked our atmosphere and climate. Luckily there was that short period of intense cold in the 2022-23 winter, which seemed to have a wonderful effect on reducing soil pests. Consequently, I did not see much of the usual carrot fly or Allium leaf miner in 2023. My onions were not affected at all by the latter, unusually. There was a little of the pest on my autumn-planted garlic, which never suffers damage anyway, and only a little late-summer damage on the leeks. My usual problems with various aphids (black fly, mealy aphid and so on) also did not arise. Somehow the weather sequences did not favour them either.

Nothing seems to stop the advance of the tree-fruit-infecting moths, though (unless Peter's trapping suggestion catches on – see above), or the *Monilinia* brown rot, especially on plums.

July rain inevitably led to potato late blight (*Phytophthora*). I saved my entire Desiree main crop by cutting off the tops as soon as brown spots appeared, as usual. But it wiped out my outdoor tomatoes.

Tomatoes with the first sign of blight



Pond Dipping

Piggottshill Pond on Plot 68 continued to thrive after its last restoration a couple of years ago, providing a seasonal home and breeding site for large numbers of frogs and newts. A very large slow-worm appeared at the edge in June. The surface duckweed, absent for a year or so after pond cleaning, returned in 2023, providing useful shade for creatures below the surface. It may have been brought on the feet of a visiting duck or heron. I saw a heron there occasionally last year, but no duck.

Daffodil bulbs planted around the pond edges provided temporary colour, and the large sedge growing in the water was exceptionally attractive while it was flowering. The hebe bush in front of the pond, much loved by bees, was sadly a victim of the severe winter frost (I assume) and died. Its removal revealed a yellow-flowered rose of Sharon growing underneath it. That will do as a replacement, though it will not grow tall and is not the very-large-flowered form. It is amazing that the box tree next to it continued to thrive to the summer, when most box in Harpenden has been killed off by box moth. Symptoms of infestation sadly began in the autumn, however, and steps were taken to protect it. It is one of the shrubs than lends itself to topiary, but so far we have not taken up the suggestion to shape it into a Cobley replica; it may now be too late unless we can save it from the moth.





Left: The pond in June, with decorative dying-off herb Robert (red) and small-flowered rose of Sharon. Duckweed covers part of the pond surface.

Right: Pond sedge in full flower.



Left: A blue geranium enhancing the pond site.

From mid-June to July there were at least two different species of damselfly (azure and large red) mating and laying eggs in the pond. There were also dragonflies: broad-bodied chaser (a pair, which probably left eggs, but I did not see any mating or egg-laying), and a much larger emperor dragonfly (a green one), which was laying eggs in the water. Another large dragonfly, southern hawker, usually turns up, but I did not spot one last year. A small red dragonfly, common darter, turned up in July. The return of fine weather in August and September brought more new ones: emerald damselfly and ruddy darter (another small red dragonfly). If you want to tell the difference, damselflies hold their wings folded back when perched, while dragonflies keep them spread. And if you are interested, the best (perhaps only) book for identifying them is *Dragons & Damsels*, by great naturalist and one-time Harpenden resident Adrian Riley. I wonder if any of the next generation of developing dragons and damsels survived the pond's severe autumn cleaning!

Various bumble bees were on the nearby rose of Sharon in early summer, but a humming-bird hawk moth decided not to stop and feed. Ever-present insects were pond skaters on the pond surface and water beetles below, occasionally coming to the surface to collect air.

Mating pair of azure damselflies, the green female egg-laying (July)



Common darter (July)



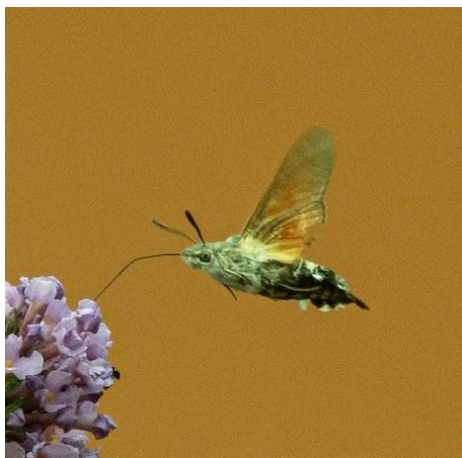
Ruddy darter (September)

Pollination

Perhaps it was the winter cold snap, then the heavy rain and late frosts that caused the apparent scarcity of bees and other pollinating insects early in the year. A lady even wrote a letter to *Herts Advertiser* complaining that there were almost no bees in her garden (looking for someone to blame, I suppose). But somehow my fruit trees were well pollinated even though I rarely saw insects on them. And all was well really, because the hot dry June then came, followed by some useful rain showers and an abundance of bees and butterflies of all kinds, and other insects, during July and August. There were exceptional numbers of red admirals and hedge browns. The once common small tortoiseshell butterflies are missing though. Apparently, they have declined nationally by 75% since 1976.



Hedge brown and comma butterflies on marjoram, July



Hummingbird hawk moth (not the Piggottshill one, which was too quick, but one in Devon: photo – Dave Seddon)

Enough from me. My thanks to the other contributors to this issue of *The Plot So Far*.

Advance notice: You might expect to see the return of an autumn edition of *The Plot So Far*, starting this year. The plan is that such future issues will include more season-related items, in the form of news, jobs-to-do, recipes perhaps, and even advice if requested (we can probably find someone with an answer). As always, contributions from you, the members, are essential. If you have an allotment story to tell, serious or humorous, please consider writing it down for the next or future issues. Please send stuff to me at any time; deadline for the next issue will be mid-August.

Finally: if you have seen this *Plot So Far* and have any comment to make about it (“utter drivel” or whatever!), or can suggest changes or improvements for later issues, please let me know. If there is no feedback, I may assume that no one has managed to find it on our website. Also, if you know of a SHAGS member without internet access who may like a printed copy, we can perhaps arrange it between us.

Geoff Bateman, Editor
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