

Nature Notes August 2012

The harvest month and named in honour of the Roman Emperor, Augustus. In Welsh, Awst; in Gaelic, An Lughnasda, the month of the Lammas festival and in Anglo Saxon, Weodmonath, the month of weeds.

August the 1st is Lammas day, the festival of the beginning of harvest, when, by tradition, the first cut sheaf of corn was offered and blessed in the church (old style this day falls on the 12th). The 5th gives us St James's day (old style) that, by tradition is the start of the oyster eating season although the more established idea is that you don't eat an oyster unless there is an "R" in the month!

Harvest flowers should now be in bloom and include the Harvest Bell, Harvest Daisy and Harvest Lilly. I have seen Harvest Bells locally but the field poppy seems much more abundant. In classical mythology, Somnus, the God of sleep, created poppies for Ceres. Because of the many seeds, the poppy was often a symbol of the earth goddess Cybele. Silverweed aka Wild Tansy is abundant now and the roots, that are edible, taste of chestnuts (or so I am advised). Silverweed, put in your shoes, will help keep your feet cool and prevent immoderate sweating (well it did in the 1700s). The crushed leaves of Feverfew, now in flower, are reputed to cure headaches and migraine. There are still a good few Foxgloves about in the hedge rows and in Croxley Woods. The cherry trees did not seem to do very well this year but there looks to be a good crop of apples on the way and blackberries look as if they could also be in for a good year.

Harvesting, depending on the weather, may soon be under way and the combines will be in the field working, sometimes, throughout the night to beat the weather. The generic term "corn" describes wheat, barley, oats and rye harvested for the grain it produces. The pigeons will be down clearing up the spilt grain and will be joined by a number of other birds so it is a good time to indulge in a bit of bird watching. The old task of shooting the rabbits as they rush from the field seems to be more or less redundant in this area and I am pleased that the tradition of chasing them and killing them by beating them with sticks has long gone. However, in those harder days the rabbits provided meat for the pot. Harvest always seems to go hand-in-hand with the consumption of cider, the favoured "field" drink especially in the West Country. Being something of a fan of proper cider (and not what usually passes for it these days) I do wonder how any of the farm hands actually survived!

The foxes are out and about and can be seen both in the streets and the fields. I was highly amused to hear a young mum tell her child to be careful of the dog (being walked on a lead) but they would go and see if the fox was there!

If you are reading this you will, very probably, have a keen interest in the Greenbelt land that keeps us apart from our more urban neighbours. It is under threat from development whether it be houses, schools or railways. If you want to keep it, be prepared to fight for it!

There is a note in one of my books that we should be aware of sleepy Adders in August. I have seen grass snakes and slow worms in and around Croxley Green but not an Adder: does anyone know if we have any?

I have not heard any news on the "birding" front although I was pleased to see a Red Kite over the Green a day or so ago. Where I help with shepherding there are numerous Red Kites and they are fascinating to watch as they soar over the fields.

An area of Stone's Orchard and the Green by Croxley House are looking splendid as meadow areas with many a wild flower and grass species growing. Well done to the Parish Rangers for their constant care and attention. Stone's Orchard will host what I believe will be Croxley Green's first Wassail ceremony in January 2013, further details later!

How is your health? August was the month believed to be the most dangerous for infectious diseases and the 16th is St Roch's Day whose name is invoked as a protection against all infectious diseases!

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If you do visit a harvest field you may want to take a refreshing drink with you. Here is a recipe from the 18th cent. To make the harvesters drink called "Shot" take a gallon of water and put it into a pan with half a pound of oatmeal, a pound of sugar, the juice of an orange and a lemon and their rind sliced small. Boil for ten minutes then add more cold water (amount not specified) take from the fire and stir until cold. Enjoy!