

October – Fruit time and leaf fall. An Damhair, the time of the rutting or Wintirfyllith, the month of the winter moon.

Winter approaches but there are still two distinct possibilities of fine days. The 10th, Old Michaelmas Day, often brings a spell of fine weather and the 18th, St Luke's Day, is called St Luke's Little Summer and fine weather can be expected in the South of England.

I managed to get two days on Dartmoor last week. Although I went down (or up to Dartmoor as some say) for some sheepdog training, I managed to get out on to the high moor for a while. The wild flower meadow that I have mentioned previously is now looking quite drab but the flowers have gone to seed and there are high expectations for an even more glorious show next year. Hopefully, we will soon have something similar in Croxley!

This is traditionally the month of collecting in the cider apples and the latter part of the month is the time to start pressing. Although I know of at least one fruit press in Croxley I have not yet come across any Croxley Cider. Cider lovers will know that it is almost impossible to get good cider in this area although The Sportsman has been known to have a few in from time to time. I invariably seek out the cider makers/retailers at the various country shows I attend but it is becoming more difficult to buy real dry cider. I was told by one maker/retailer that he never brings it out of the West Country as it doesn't suit Home Counties tastes. Shame on the HC!

Time to pick your sloes for the making of that wonderfully warming drink, sloe gin. You can buy it in the shops but there are plenty of recipes around and home-made will always be best. (Any hints where to find sloes in Croxley?)

October is generally the start of the rutting (mating) season of the red deer (*cervus elephus*) the largest of the UK's wild deer. The stags will start competing for the hinds and the stags roaring or "belling" can be heard, as can the crash of locking antlers as stags fight for territory and mates. You don't have to travel that far to get to red deer country as there are large herds on The Quantocks and also, of course, Exmoor. There are a number of opportunities to join guided tours or "safaris" on Exmoor that will greatly increase your chance of seeing some of the action whilst keeping safe, rutting stags can be very dangerous creatures. Nearer to home and indeed all-round the country, shepherds will be making the final selection of breeding ewes before putting the ram or tup in at the end of this month or in early November. The mixed flock that I help look after reduced its rams last year and this year we will be borrowing a Herdwick ram from another flock to bring fresh blood into our own Herdwicks. Sheep farmers are, at last, making some money from their flocks as lamb prices rise and there is an increasing use of mutton both in the catering industry and our own homes. Herdwick mutton is known as the King's Mutton and is of excellent quality and the local butcher to our flock can never get enough. If you have the opportunity, try some.

Next year's crops can be seen poking its head through some of the local fields and should get off to a reasonable start in this weather. One wonders if He will send the snow in winter the warmth to swell the grain.

The end of this month brings us Halloween, All Hallows E'en, the Eve of All Saints Day and of Samhain. It is also called Winter's Eve and is the last night of the Celtic year. It is the night of the dead when the ghosts of the departed are said to visit the Earth and when witches and evil spirits

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have most power. However, those of you that have been following these notes will know what plants are needed to guard against unwelcome supernatural behaviour and all will be well. Enjoy a safe and peaceful All Souls and Samhain.