



Friends of Reading Old Cemetery Spring 2024 Newsletter



(Photo credit: Leslee Barron)

Introduction

Welcome to our first Friends of Reading Old Cemetery (FOROC) newsletter. We are planning to publish a seasonal edition 3/4 times a year and we would really welcome any articles, wildlife sightings and other contributions from you – our readers.

By way of background, the Friends of Reading Old Cemetery was set up over eleven years ago. We are a member of Econet, which is a wildlife conservation group that undertakes a wide range of activities relating to the natural environment in public open spaces and other sites in and around Reading. Visit Econet's website for more information (Econet.org.uk).

Over the past few months FOROC and Conserve Reading on Wednesdays (CROW: also, members of Econet) have continued our ongoing path clearance work to ensure all walkways are navigable; created habitat piles from fallen dead wood and storm damage (see article below); cleared non-native species (i.e snowberry); trimmed and raked off the grass from the two wildflower meadow areas and litter picked the whole site.

Our work parties



(Photo credit: Teresa Verney-Brookes)

All of the practical conservation work we undertake at the cemetery is following the site Ecological Management Plan which is updated every five years and sets out where, when and which tasks should be carried out.

If you would like to be involved in our monthly work parties, please do join us on the first Sunday of every month from 2 pm – 4 pm (no experience is needed, and all tools are provided).

Habitat piles

On your perambulations around the cemetery, you may have noticed small piles of dead wood stacked into neat (ish) piles. These have been created by the Friends volunteers from fallen and cut wood around the site. These so-called 'habitat piles' provide a vital refuge for invertebrates, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians which in turn provide for birds, bats and other creatures.

As a nation we have become increasingly over-tidy in our gardens and other open spaces, which has in part contributed to the worrying and drastic decline in many species of wildlife here in the UK over the past fifty years. So, please help us spread the word about how and why these habitats really can make a huge difference and maybe create some in your local green space too.



(Photo credit: Leslee Barron)

Snowdrops in the cemetery

You may know that there's one area of the cemetery where snowdrops flower in profusion from late January through February. Snowdrops were often planted in cemeteries and graveyards as they symbolised not only hope but also sympathy and consolation. We don't know how or precisely where these snowdrops began but what is known is that in the open ground beyond the carpet of flowers lie several common graves which have been identified from burial records.

Common graves were the last resting place for those who could only afford the most basic burial as well as for those who died in the workhouse. No memorials or grave markers were permitted. Graves were shared by several people both young and old, from tiny babies to the very elderly. Within the cemetery, there are more common graves than those with memorials in both the Anglican and the Nonconformist sections. Identification of their locations is ongoing as is research into the lives of those within them. Each of the people buried there was important to someone, loved by someone and yet forgotten within the cemetery among the memorials and inscriptions for the more fortunate.



(Photo credit: Jan Clark)

The Snowdrop Project

There has always been an aim to memorialise these forgotten lives. Two years ago, the Snowdrop Project was initiated as part of this aim. In March, once the snowdrops have finished flowering and are 'in the green' volunteers transplant some to the open area where there are common graves. The intention is to begin to provide a living memorial for those who have none. Members of the local community also contributed plants from their gardens. In this way, those who were once part of the Reading community are no longer forgotten. At our most recent work party on 3 March, we continued the annual transplanting, and, thanks to willing and very hardworking volunteers, we were able to extend the area planted considerably.



(Photo credit: Jan Clark)

Imbolc Walk

Thank you to the 26 people who joined for our Imbolc walk around the cemetery on 11 February and a really huge thanks to Jan Clark for the delicious Imbolc cakes. Imbolc (also called Saint Brigid's Day) is a Gaelic traditional festival which falls on the midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox and marks the beginning of spring. To this end, we enjoyed spotting various flowers that are starting to emerge from their winter slumber and learning about some of the legends, folklore and medicinal uses associated with these plants. Our final stop was to sit amongst the snowdrops where we enjoyed a cuppa, cake, and a chat.



(Photo credit: John Holden)

Future activities

Following the overwhelming success of the recent bat and tree walks, we are planning a whole series of nature-focused guided walks at the site so please do let us know if you have any particular topics you would like us to include or indeed any walks that you would like to lead.

We will also run various events as part of 'Wild About Reading' and 'National Cemeteries Week' at Reading Old Cemetery.

And in other news...

During Spring 2024 FOROC are looking to form a committee of volunteers, so please let us know if you would be interested in joining this. We would also warmly welcome any articles for future newsletters or details of any wildlife sightings you may have seen.

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