

Account of Purley on Thames

Spring in Sulham Woods

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This is one of four articles by Bill Fisher recalling the four seasons around Sulham Woods

A halo of re-birth caresses the land, the chilled earth responds. Trees spring to life and the very air invigorates and imbues one with a sense of well being and feeling glad to be alive. Robert Browning was so right when he penned "Home thoughts from abroad" to poignantly advocate "O to be in England now that April is there"

The mating call of the birds, in fact all living creatures are in tune as they triumph over the austerity of Winter. It is a delight to observe the birds' intricacies in providing in the main their beautifully constructed nests. I do not include the rook or the wood pigeon in this category. The magpie's industry in ensuring their nests are completed with a roof of twigs. Sadly the peewit is rarely seen locally now. I recall as a boy following in the rear of my grandfather, Carter Higgs, as he ploughed the southern section of Sulham estate with his team, scanning the earlier furrows for peewit's nests. Some fields were already exhibiting a carpet of emerald green. Even most fish are accorded a precious respite between mid-March and mid-June to enable them to proliferate their species. It becomes a nostalgic pleasure to walk the woods again amongst the bluebells, primroses, wild violets and a host of other flowers.

Alas, partridge and pheasant chicks no longer grace Sulham woods, at least I have not seen any. In pre-war days when quite a few chicks hatched naturally; on one occasion it was a special pleasure for me to chance upon a mother, her chicks following, clustered together at her rear in the field above the Lodge. I marvelled at the mother's attempt to divert me from her chicks. Sighting me she advanced, wings spread and dragging the ground. Enticing me to try to catch her, meanwhile drawing me farther away from her brood. I allowed her to win and when the two of us were suitably distanced she spread her wings and flew, not back to her chicks; but at a diagonal as an additional inducement for me to follow. Doubtless she returned to usher the brood to the safety of the undergrowth in due course.

I would like to proffer an anecdote of an incident of Sulham life which occurred in the early 1920s imparted to me by a great friend of mine who has recently died and who was kind enough to record his reminiscences on tape for me.

It happened that Sulham School playground possessed swings for the Sulham children. The Tidmarsh boys made it their business to visit and use these after school hours. The lady cleaner took umbrage to this and used to wait until the boys were in full swing and upon their return swing she would clout their backsides with her besom. The estate foreman would also admonish them by shouting "Get off back to Tidmarsh, we don't want the likes of you here". Together it provided an excellent deterrent. However the boys repaid the foreman in kind; knowing that it was his habit to visit the Dog each evening, they congregated in a semi-circle outside and when he appeared, in full chorus they chanted "We don't want the likes of you over here drinking our beer"

I think this may be a good time to conclude before you tell me to get off back to Tilehurst.