

Islington Gardeners

www.islingtongardeners.org.uk

NEWSLETTER: JULY - SEPTEMBER 2009

Midsummer 2009

Having had to replant one side of the garden last year, and half of the other this (because of building works) has made me realise the enormous benefits that this can bring. Everything is so much more vigorous and floriferous. The downside is of course the hard work entailed, and especially the watering needed to re-establish the plants. There are both nice and nasty surprises of course, as there are in any season. For example something – almost certainly slugs – has massacred the scarlet lychnis chalcidonica, which has never suffered before, and there has been an unwelcome return of capsid bugs, which attack the flowering tips of various plants. On the other hand, two white hardy geraniums I thought I had lost have reappeared, notably *Geranium phaeum* 'Album' and *Geranium pyrenaicum* forma *albiflorum*. Both flower in early summer.

The removal of the big cotoneaster and the magnolia grandiflora has paid off enormously in terms of letting in both light and rain. The birch replacing the former is doing well, but I still haven't made up my mind about a replacement for the latter. The downside of this is the way that some thuggish plants which struggled to grow under the cotoneaster, are now taking over.

So apart from rebuilding the rockery (to stop the wall collapsing into the bottom garden) and (perhaps) replanting the borders that haven't had to be done already, and keeping the veg. going, not much needs doing!

To return to the slugs, which are more rampant than ever, it seems, I decided to really go for them. So for what seemed to me a frightening sum, I ordered some copper bands to go round the bottom of large plants, some nematodes to water on at two-monthly intervals in the growing season, and a large thing of 'Organic' slug pellets.

The problem with the copper bands is that it is quite easy for other plants to grow over them, offering a path for the slugs to my clematis. Still I expect to re-use them. I don't think the nematodes are a lot of use except for the vegetable beds, because to do the whole flower-garden would be much too expensive, and not all of it needs them. So that needs thinking about. The pellets are useful, and do seem to offer some measure of protection to plants as they come up, and to newly planted seedlings. I will certainly get some more of them. I'd be very glad to hear about any body else's experience in the War Against Slugs. Tamsin

What makes a successful Plant Sale?

A well situated venue – we have had that for some time now thanks to Judith's generosity in allowing us free rein to invade her Canonbury patch. Good teas – thanks to Dee, Deborah and their team plus the IG bakers - we have that as standard. Plants a plenty – we've always had those. Entertainment – for the last couple of years "Highbury Builders" have informed and entertained us and we hope they will do so again next year. Plenty of people. That's the one out of our control because it is so dependant on the weather.

This year, for the first time in years, we had a perfect warm sunny day, and, with all the elements come together, we hit the jackpot. We made £940.00 profit. This has astonished us and we, the committee, are extremely grateful for the help, support, plants and expertise donated by you all.

What will we do with the money? Some has already been donated to charities – Rose Bowl, Alzheimer's, The Mayor of Islington's 2009 charity to name but a few. We also fund the Nancy Pattenden Wildlife Gardening memorial prize within Islington in Bloom. The rest will ensure that IG remains afloat and we will be able to provide the membership with interesting, but increasingly expensive, speakers for next year. Joy C.

Martin Murray 1928 – 2009

Very recently Islington Gardeners have lost a great friend and ally in Martin Murray, husband of IG's membership secretary Jo.

I was always aware that Martin was a most interesting man with great knowledge of many things that were as esoteric as they were surprising. However, after reading a most informative "other lives" obituary in The Guardian on 2nd July 2009 (which I urge you to read and which may be found on the IG website) I realized that I'd only scratched the surface.

Martin and Jo (before Jo became membership secretary and before I became chair) were great IG coach trip enthusiasts; ready to help me with the directions, local knowledge and folk lore of the area of the "appointed gardens". You may remember that Martin, with Jo's help, gave a most informative and well received talk on the wild flowers of the Austrian Alps a couple of years ago at the AGM. Martin was also generous enough to invariably lend us his screen and projector for our talks and lectures, freely giving help and advice to our lecturers, who were always extremely grateful. I found his help invaluable.

We send our sincerest condolences to Jo and her family. Joy C.

Northamptonshire Coach Trip 11 June 2009

I have heard so many complimentary reports on this visit that we have decided to publish two – in fact I wish I'd been able to go myself. The trip was most ably organized by Jill Leman and Suzanne Greaves who receive my heartfelt thanks. The coach company is "Dans Coaches" of South Woodford 020 8505 8833. Joy C.

1. We decided to go on the trip mainly because it's so good when somebody else does the organisation, and we are very bad at getting round to such things. We knew nothing about the gardens before we booked.

It turned out to be a wonderful day, far exceeding our highest expectations. First we visited the nursery belonging to cousins of the organiser, which was filled with interesting plants, some of them very unusual. Home-made cake was brought with us to go with coffee – delicious! There was an attractive garden, although the main focus was clearly the nursery. There was a long queue to pay for all the plants we snapped up.



We went on to Coton Manor which was close by. The gardens there are beautiful and beautifully kept, and full of variety. They are on a slope, and full advantage has been taken of this in many ways, both for the garden itself and for the 'borrowed' landscape forming a backdrop. Near the house there are terraces with beds and containers filled with colourful plants. As you go down the slope the gardens become less and less formal, passing through such areas as the water garden, and the series of rills and pools flowing down from it, colour-themed borders, and areas dedicated to particular seasons. We were too late for the bluebell wood, but the wildflower meadow was at its height' full of ox-eye daisies, cornflowers, poppies and yellow rattle, among other things.

Coming back up the other side of the garden via yet more delightful areas, you get to the nursery and shop. Once more, a great deal of temptation had to be faced, and I think there were very few of us who did not succumb, at least in a modest way, however full our gardens.

2 After a very easy journey (thank you Dans) we arrived at Ravensthorpe Nursery which had a large collection of trees and shrubs as well as an attractive garden with lovely views of the Northampton country all round it. Coffee and home made cakes (thank you Jill and Suzanne) were enjoyed and what looked to me like a great number of

plants were bought and stacked in the coach before we took off for Coton Manor.

I have been looking at gardens for many years and have always kept a list of what I think are the best; they go from 1 – 5. For several years no.1. has been Helmingham nr. Ipswich but now no more, No. 1 will be Coton Manor. When walking around, talking to people, everyone was saying how beautiful and interesting it was.

The reason for my enthusiasm was firstly the planning, there were so many different gardens within the whole, each having its particular plants. There is the Woodland Garden; the Bog and Water Garden; the Rose Garden; the Herb Garden and many more. Near to the house is a traditional garden, very much attached to the house with a pond, lawn and borders. When you leave, the ground slopes down to three wonderful herbaceous borders and these face the main lawn and beyond that the meadow and a lovely view of the Northamptonshire countryside. We were able to walk through the meadow, along small paths completely surrounded by buttercups and white daisies, so enjoyable. My second enthusiasm was for the plants which I thought had been chosen with great care and feeling and all well looked after. I have but one criticism, two of the flamingos were altogether too pink.



Open Garden Squares Weekend. 13th -14th June 2009

This is now as regular a feature as the “Open House” weekend in September. It’s organized by the London Parks and Gardens Trust of which IG has affiliated membership.

I was unable to attend Dee’s outing to Belgravia on Saturday but instead decided to try the roof garden above the old Derry and Toms on Sunday. Taking advantage of free parking behind the Albert Hall we arrived just after 9am. No queues and had a chance to speak with the head gardener who was lift man for the morning. Arriving on the 6th floor is a disorienting experience as the garden has the feel of a garden at ground level. The walls are high and it was only the odd church spire poking above the walls that reminded the visitor that they were elevated. The Spanish Garden could easily double as a set for “Sunset Boulevard”. But it was a most pleasant experience to sit, read the papers in peace and soak up the sun LA style.

A covered walkway led to the Tudor garden. This perhaps needs updating. The faux Tudor structure is there, but maybe the planting just needs to have a more contemporary twist rather than adhere to the strictures of a 1970s scheme. On to the English Woodland Garden. Yes, mature trees and ponds all on 40cms (18”) of soil. Four flamingos added to the surreal nature of the experience. However it was only when we ventured onto the 7th floor, housing a bar, restaurant, private dining room and loos with built in aquarium that we could see the garden in the context of its elevation against the backdrop of the roofs of West London – stunning.

Just behind Boots on Ken High St is Iverna Court Garden, overlooked by the pretty white Armenian Church of St. Sarkis. The garden was completely re-landscaped in 2005 with many plants that could easily be found in any of our gardens as the square is heavily shaded by seven mature plane trees.

We set off for the Ismaili Centre Roof Garden strolling past several other squares that were not open but my eye was caught by a plant unknown to me on the perimeter of one of them. Foolishly I didn’t photograph it, but in sorting through some back copies of the Garden last night I found it to be *Dicroa febrifuga*. This has immediately

installed itself very highly on my wish list. Anyone know it?

After waiting for so long to visit the Ismaili Roof garden I was a little disappointed with its bedding plants planting. However the courtesy and generosity of the Ismaili people there more than made up for any gardening deficiencies. We completed our visit with a Pimms at the King Henry's Walk Garden. Great day. Joy C

Gardens to visit by Bus and Train

Hatfield House is perhaps best known as the place where the young Princess Elizabeth first heard of the death of Mary Tudor and her own accession to the throne. The contemporary knot garden still adjoins the Tudor Old Palace. But the other gardens started a little later, after Robert Cecil, first Earl of Salisbury built his fine Jacobean house and employed John Tradescant the Elder, who brought back from Europe rare trees, bulbs, plants and fruit.

The nearest I came to meeting the present owners of Hatfield House, the Marquess and Marchioness of Salisbury, was a chat with their chef, Kevin. He was in the huge walled vegetable garden, picking peas and beans (no blackfly) and young carrots (no signs of carrot fly damage either). Kevin, who does some tending of this area, cheerfully put it down to his organic bug spray -- from Asda. He pointed out the alpine strawberries left to grow wild behind a clipped rosemary hedge and blueberries in designer ceramic pots. The raised beds included waving asparagus fronds, and the walls were lined with morello cherries.

Accessed from the vegetable garden is the East Garden, on the private side side of the Jacobean house. This is very formal, with elegant parterres and topiary and two walks of pleached hornbeams. The wall below the terrace is covered with roses, honeysuckle and abutilons while roses topple across the low wall overlooking the maze. The beds are filled with dark blue delphiniums, old roses like Rosa Mundi and Souvenir du Docteur Jamain, aquilegias, penstemons. Among the geraniums I noticed my favourite, the airy double blue Geranium Pratense Plenum Caeruleum. Don't miss an opening in the wall below the terrace, leading to a grassy area with two life size openwork metal elephants and a baby one. They are on the way to becoming more topiary, judging from the low shrubby growth inside.

The West Garden, on the far side of the house, is also filled with cottage garden style planting but with even more emphasis on scented plants. One part is formal with geometric beds around a fountain. The lower part has deep borders with Madonna lilies, phlox, heliotrope, philadelphus Belle Etoile. But most in evidence are masses of old fashioned and strongly perfumed dianthus, single flowered, white or delicate pastel pink. Flowing round the formal areas east and west is the wilderness garden, which features in spring drifts of snowdrops, crocus, bluebells, naturalised daffodils, allium and rhododendrons.

Tickets: House, Park and West garden £10.50 senior £9.50; Park & West Garden £6, free to Royal Horticultural Society members. East Garden extra £3.50 no concessions. The Coach House Restaurant serves a range of light meals and refreshments. Travel: Hatfield Station is opposite the drive leading through the park to Hatfield House. Weekdays: frequent service on the Welwyn Garden City line from Essex Road, Highbury & Islington, Finsbury Park. Weekends: Finsbury Park four trains an hour. Check times on 08457 484950. Mary R

One man's weed

A neighbour offered me some lily of the valley for a forgotten corner, saying "they are just weeds really". I turned them down, not because this is a plant I think of as a weed but because I was planting a hot dry spot where they would certainly not flourish. We all know that lily of the valley can be rampant when it gets conditions it likes. What a lot of us may not realise is that it is a wildflower, and a native one at that.

This prompted me to musings on what we define as wildflowers, garden flowers and weeds. A convenient definition of a weed is a plant in the wrong place. That means that any plant, even the choicest specimen of something beautiful and normally hard to cultivate, can be termed a weed if it is in a place where it is not wanted. And, in theory, you could fill a piece of ground with dandelions, ragwort, willowherbs, shepherd's purse, chickweed and other such enthusiastic colonisers and call it a wildflower garden. In practice, I doubt any of us would actually do that, not least because we respect our neighbours' gardens enough not deliberately to let the

prolific seeds of these plants drift around. But a garden planned mainly around native plants and wildlife is an attractive proposition and there are some stunning examples – like Marc Carlton's garden which he described and showed us pictures of at his talk at last year's AGM.

So, what is a wildflower? I think it has to include any plant (fungi perhaps excepted?) which has not been deliberately hybridised for garden cultivation. That means any species plant. I did a small census in my garden and surprised myself. At least half of what I grow qualifies. And about half of that is "real" wildflowers in the sense of being British natives. That includes the obvious ones like Welsh poppies, dog and sweet violets and heartsease which were brought in accidentally, seed themselves about and then get reduced by me to manageable proportions.

But there are also less obvious ones which I introduced deliberately and only discovered to be wildflowers when I started reading the reference books. Among natives are the aforementioned lilies of the valley – very useful in some corners where not much else will grow, *geranium sanguineum* (Bloody Cranesbill) and *geranium pratense* (Meadow Cranesbill), *lysimachia nummularia* (Creeping Jenny), *achillea ptarmica* (Sneezewort), *stachys betonica* (Wood Betony) pictured below, marjoram and (a real surprise as I had long assumed it was an import) *allium schoenoprasum* (Chives). The last three are all much loved by bees.



And then the non natives. So much that we cultivate was wild at home before it was brought here. Europeans like *geranium phaeum*, *lilium bulbiferum*, *cyclamen hederifolium* and *saponaria ocymoides* (Rock Soapwort) came early. So, probably, did *campanula poscharskyana* (locally familiar as “the Canonbury Campanula” - native to Croatia). Others from further afield arrived later as plant collectors scoured the world. The yellow Banksian rose is wild in China as is *trachelospermum jasminoides sinensis* and *ceratostigma willmottianum* (hardy plumbago). *Plumbago capensis* is from South Africa, species fuchsias from South America.

A good indicator that a plant may be wild is when it is available in only one form and colour, or a very small range of forms and colours, like the *trachelospermum* and *ceratostigma*, both with only two kinds on offer. The breeders have not got busy on them – yet. But even those hybridised thousands of times, like roses and clematis also have species frequently grown in gardens. As well as the

Banksian rose, I also have a *rosa sericea* (another Chinese native) which was planted for me by a some bird which must have dined on a rosehip in a neighbouring garden and dropped the seed as it visited mine. It chose a very suitable spot. I have never wanted to move it.

Clematis tangutica is interestingly on the edge of the wildflower definition because the kind (notice I didn't say species or variety) most frequently grown is that named Bill MacKenzie. Plants with names like this are generally cultivars (hybrids raised for the garden). This one is a selection. *C. tangutica* can be readily grown from seed, but most of what comes up is of fairly indifferent quality so, when a particularly good specimen turns up, it will be propagated from cuttings for sale. There are many more examples of selections in the nursery trade, although not in my garden.

So, am I a wildflower gardener? No. Why? Because I don't choose to grow particular plants for the fact that they are wild. I choose them because I think they are attractive and might suit a particular spot in my garden (I am not always right about that) and quite often because they happened to be available as I was passing and caught my fancy. Alison

Awards, Awards Awards

The date of the big day is now rapidly drawing near for this year's Islington in Bloom. Everybody is working extremely hard to ensure that the Borough is ready for its first entry into Britain in Bloom. This is a huge honour for a Borough like Islington that is not the most obvious place to think of when you talk of "In Bloom". Our first test will be on 15th July for London in Bloom. This is still very important and we want to maintain our Gold standard and defend our title of Best Small City.

We have had an amazing response to this year's Islington in Bloom. We gave out all 1000 packets of wildflower seeds for tree pits and entries this year are up by over 50%! The Council has increased the number of roads with floral displays so there are now over a 1000 separate baskets on display.

The date for the Britain in Bloom judging is 10th August and we are working with residents, businesses and community groups to get ready. Some of the sites will be visiting include the new green wall on the Driver public house at Kings Cross, Duncan Terrace Gardens, Penn Road, Corsica St, Culpeper Community Garden and King Henry's Walk.

It is a huge achievement just to be nominated for Britain in Bloom and, of course, we want to be successful and show just how green fingered, passionate and creative the Borough of Islington is. So, fingers crossed, and do try to make sure your garden or forgotten corner is looking spick and span just in case we're driving past! Andrew Bedford (Principal Parks Manager, LBI Environment & Regeneration Department)

Visit to Mark Donaldson's Urban Food Garden and Cath Parker's Micro Food Farm on 3rd May

Around 20 of us visited Mark Donaldson's urban food garden in Grenville Road, N19. This approximately 35ft largely concrete backyard has been transformed into a productive unit. It was early in the vegetable-growing season, but Mark had been busy for weeks raising seeds in the covered side alley of his garden, and was well ahead with his planting-out. Mark is trying to grow food as sustainably and inexpensively as possible. He collects blue plastic vegetable boxes thrown out as rubbish by market traders and local small shops, stacks them in towers and then raises seedlings (in lavatory roll centres) in the layers. He was also experimenting with growing lettuces in these boxes (but not in the towers). Young bean and sweetcorn plants were laid out tidily in the rectangular beds surrounded by concrete which Mark has inherited from the landlord, and we admired his system of window boxes (for tomatoes) supported in tiers against the garden wall by unwanted estate agent posts, also reclaimed from the streets. We discussed techniques for growing potatoes in plastic bag containers. Mark uses New Horizon peat-free potting compost, and gets other supplies from www.GardenBargains.com. Our thanks to Mark for giving us such a very informative visit. If you missed it,

Mark has placed several articles on his approach to sustainable urban food growing on the Islington Gardeners' website. Mark is involved with the Islington Organic Growers' Network, details of which are also on the website, and can be contacted via info@islingtonorganicgrowers.org.uk.

We then went on to visit Cath Parker's garden in Albert Road where she has installed a Micro Food Farm. This is a very compact system for growing fresh organic food on one's doorstep, designed and built by the Highbury Builders' Collective, with the objective of enabling householders, schools and community groups to produce food and recycle food waste on their doorstep regardless



of whether they have access to any green space. The key component is a vertically stacked wormery containing hybrid “tiger” worms. Having installed the MMF last autumn Cath, new to gardening, is now enjoying a constant supply of salad vegetables. An article explaining the MFF in detail is now available in the Library of the IG website.

Thank you Cath and Liam for such an interesting visit (and for Cath’s delicious homemade chocolate sweets). Liam will be happy to be contacted about the MFF at: info@highburybuilders.co.uk Sue L

Wildlife Gardening

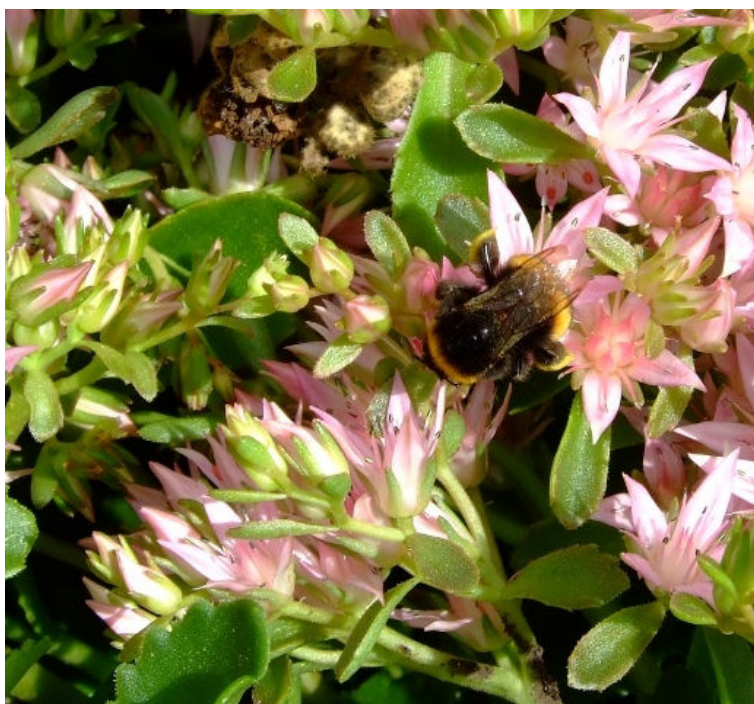
The London Wildlife Trust is running a “Garden for a Living London” campaign, and is encouraging people to visit its website www.wildlondon.org.uk/gardening and make a public pledge to make their gardens more wildlife friendly and sustainable. There is also a mass of useful literature on the website.

Spurred on by Marc Carlton, the bumble bee enthusiast who came and talked at our AGM last year, I have been trying to identify the wild bees (much more difficult than expected). There is a very conspicuous bee which has been around with a carnelian-coloured mane and a white rear tip, but it has not appeared in my reference books. I have now found a very good website at http://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/bumblebees_id.htm which has very clear pictures of bees, and it turns out that my mystery bee is a new arrival from the Continent, the Tree Bumblebee, which only started coming to the UK in 2001. To help the bees in your garden, plant Cosmos (from Mexico), very striking, gives a “lift” to the wildlife garden and takes the visitor’s eye off the equally popular (with bees) Herb Robert.

Joy Chamberlin drew my attention to the weekend Guardian of 6th June which ran an article “Let’s Go Native”, dealing with ways of combining native plants in attractive groupings, (viewable on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/jun/06/wild-plants-gardens>), and she was particularly delighted that she has almost all the wildflowers mentioned either in her back or front gardens or in her Forgotten Corner Strip across the road.

I have been enjoying the display of cow parsley, buttercups, and long grass in the extensive frontage of the Hornsey Lane Estate onto the Hornsey Lane, just at the northern edge of the Borough. I had even seen speckled wood butterflies.

Disappointingly, this wonderful sight was not due to an intentional change in the mowing regime but to a delay in the organisation of the cutting connected with a



change in contractors. Many insects need long grass, and several species of butterflies lay their eggs in long grass, including the speckled wood. If anyone would like to support me in trying to persuade the Council and Homes for Islington to relax the mowing regime to encourage biodiversity please get in touch with me at: Susan@lees.org.uk

Another project supporting our native wildflowers and plants is the River of Flowers, based at the Archway Herbal Clinic, N19. The website is now set up, and can be viewed at www.riverofflowers.org. For the next three weeks there is an exhibition of flower paintings, photographs, and vintage pressed flower books, please see IG or RoF websites for details. It is also possible to buy a copy of “Grow Your Own Drugs” by James Wong, based on the recent BBC TV programme on herbalism. Herbalists at the Clinic contributed some of the recipes. Lots of easy-to-make plant based recipes and clear guidance as to which plant to use for what purpose. Many of the plants are

already in our gardens, whether invited or not. The ubiquitous lemon balm will make a calming tea, as well as inhibiting cold sores, for example.

Richard Meyers of the Ecology Centre has written a charming booklet on “Nature’s Forgotten Folklore: Myths and Magic in Islington”. Available free to visitors to the Ecology Centre, 191 Drayton Park Road, N5, Richard takes a light hearted look at traditional stories about some of our native plants, animals and birds, and Kier Wickenham’s illustrations are enchanting.

Finally, money is available for two sustainability projects. The London Orchard Project is intended to develop new mini-orchard projects across London. They are looking for community groups that have access to land and would like to plant fruit trees. If interested, please contact rowena@thelondonorchardproject.org as quickly as possible before the funds are all allocated. The Islington Climate Change Adaptation Grant. 19 householders in Highbury have obtained a grant from this source to dig up concrete from their front gardens. This will improve drainage, reduce flooding, and help biodiversity. The grant seems to be available to groups only. So if anybody is interested in getting rid of their own concrete front gardens they should find some similarly-minded neighbours and then contact either Councillor Katie Dawson, (Katie.dawson@islington.gov.uk) or Oliver Burke (oliver.burke@islington.gov.uk) and Bevan Jones (bevan.jones@islington.gov.uk). Sue L

Birds in the garden

Every morning I wake up to birdsong. I am very lucky and felt even more privileged to have a robin bob bobbing about the garden. I felt even more delighted to see the robin doing a very decent hummingbird impersonation before diving into the ivy that grows on the north facing wall. A nest was being built and in due course beaks full of grubs were delivered to young. The garden was animated by the robins and they did not seem to mind me having tea in the garden, but I always kept a respectful distance from their nest area. They bathed in the full watering cans that I left in the sun to take the chill off the water prior to watering. I got to know their calls and would shoo the neighbour’s cat away if I heard the “warning” call.

But on Monday morning, whilst I was in the attic, the air filled with a dreadful machine gun Cack Cack Cack Cack Cack. Rushing to the window, I glimpsed a flash of black and white. Hoping I wasn’t too late, I dashed out into the garden. Distress calls rent the air. I got rid of the cat that had been attracted by the commotion and went back inside to leave the robins in peace. Observing from the window I noticed the robins continuing to take food into the nest, or the area near the nest, and I got on with work keeping my fingers crossed.

The robins continued to call in a distressed way for the next few hours until I could stand it no longer and ventured into the garden. It was then I saw the remains of the nest that had been ripped from its moorings by those black reptilian claws. The robins left the garden about six in the evening. I have not seen them since. The garden is no longer so animated and I feel a great sadness. Joy C

Advance warning of changes to Membership Renewal 2010

We, at IG, are always looking for ways to simplify the most basic of tasks. To that end we are going to send out membership renewal forms independently of the Newsletter and earlier than usual.

Membership renewal forms for 2010 will be sent out early in November 2009. Reasons for this change are:

- forms sent independently are less likely to get lost amongst the mailings of the big January send out;
- you will have longer to renew your membership, – for example you can save on postage by doing it at the AGM in November; and
- the membership secretary’s job will be made simpler.

The membership year will continue to run from 1 February to 31 January and your current membership card will remain valid until the end of January 2010 .

Next Newsletter – early October – last date for copy 20th September to Alison Barlow, 1 Bingham Street N1 2QQ or alisonbarlow47@aol.com