Friends of Wickford Memorial Park AGM Talk – The Stumpery Garden and Its Wildlife

One of the most exciting and quietly transformative areas within Wickford Memorial Park: the stumpery garden. At first glance, it may look like a collection of old tree stumps, logs, and uneven planting but in reality, it is something far more important. It is a living system, designed to support biodiversity and create a rich mosaic of habitats for wildlife of all kinds.

What is a Stumpery?

A stumpery is a garden feature made primarily from upturned tree roots, trunks, and decaying wood. Traditionally, they were used in Victorian gardens to grow ferns and shade-loving plants. Today, they've taken on a new role as powerful tools for ecological restoration and habitat creation.

Dead wood, which might once have been seen as waste, is actually one of the most valuable resources in a natural landscape. By incorporating both standing and fallen timber some desiccated, some decaying we are mimicking natural woodland processes.

Dead Wood: The Foundation of Life

Let's start with the wood itself.

The stumpery includes:

- **Standing dead wood**, which provides perches, nesting cavities, and feeding grounds.
- **Fallen logs and buried wood**, which slowly decompose and enrich the soil.

This creates what ecologists call a "decay gradient" different stages of decomposition that support different species.

Fungi begin the process, breaking down lignin and cellulose. This attracts invertebrates such as beetles, woodlice, and larvae. In turn, these become food for birds, hedgehogs, and small mammals.

Dead wood habitats are so important that many species rely on them exclusively. Without them, entire chains of life disappear.

The Role of Water: Ponds and Damp Microhabitats

The presence of ponds near the stumpery adds another layer of biodiversity.

Water creates:

- Breeding grounds for amphibians like frogs and newts
- Habitat for aquatic insects such as dragonflies and damselflies
- Drinking sources for birds and mammals

Even the damp edges where wood meets water—become hotspots for life. Mosses, liverworts, and moisture-loving plants thrive here, while insects use these areas for egg-laying. Liverworts are small, non-vascular, spore-producing plants they lack true roots, stems, or leaves, often appearing as flat, lobed ribbon-like structures or small, flattened stems with leafy scale.

Grassland with MG5 Characteristics

The surrounding grassland is particularly valuable because it reflected MG5 characteristics a type of species-rich neutral grassland. This was before the turf was scarped back, the hoping is the lowing of nutrient and exposing soil would encourage the seed back to germinate.

This means:

- A diversity of grasses and wildflowers
- Seasonal variation in colour and structure
- Support for pollinators like bees, butterflies, and hoverflies

These grasslands are increasingly rare in the UK, making their presence in the park especially important.

They act as feeding grounds for insects, which then support higher predators such as birds and bats.

From Soil to Sky: A Full Habitat Network

What makes this area special is not just each feature individually, but how they connect.

- **Underground**: fungi, roots, and invertebrates
- **Ground level**: amphibians, small mammals, insects
- **Shrub and mid-layer**: nesting birds and pollinators
- **Canopy and airspace**: birds of prey and bats

This layered structure creates resilience. If one part of the system struggles, others can compensate.

New Flower Beds, Tree Planting, and Bulbs – Supporting Wildlife in Boggy Conditions

Another important element of the park's development is the creation of new flower beds, designed not just for visual appeal, but as valuable wildlife habitat—especially in areas with **boggy or moisture-retentive soils**.

Rather than fighting these conditions, we are working *with* them. Damp ground opens up opportunities to grow a rich variety of plants that thrive in wetter environments and provide excellent resources for wildlife.

Flower Beds for Pollinators and Biodiversity

These flower beds will be planted with a mix of native and wildlife-friendly species that:

- Provide nectar and pollen throughout the seasons
- Support bees, butterflies, and other pollinators
- Offer shelter and structure at different heights

These plants will help extend the feeding season from early spring through to late summer.

Tree Planting for Structure and Habitat

Tree planting will complement the flower beds by adding height, shelter, and long-term ecological value.

Trees also:

- Create shade and microclimates
- Provide nesting and roosting sites
- Eventually contribute to the dead wood habitat as part of the natural cycle

Bulb Planting for Seasonal Interest

Bulbs will be introduced to ensure early and late seasonal food sources for insects, as well as visual impact.

Suitable choices include:

These will naturalise over time, creating drifts that return year after year.

Why This Matters

Together, the flower beds, trees, and bulbs will:

- Increase plant diversity
- Extend the flowering season
- Support a wider range of insects
- Strengthen the overall habitat network within the park

Importantly, they will also make the space more engaging for visitors—demonstrating how thoughtful planting can support wildlife while enhancing the landscape.

Wildlife You Can Expect

Let’s talk about the wildlife this habitat can support.

Plants:
Ferns, mosses, fungi, wildflowers, and shade-tolerant species will establish naturally over time.

Invertebrates:
Beetles, spiders, butterflies, moths, and countless unseen species that form the backbone of the ecosystem.

Amphibians and Reptiles:
Frogs, toads, newts, and potentially slow worms or grass snakes, especially near water and log piles.

Birds:
Robins, wrens, woodpeckers, and other insect-feeding birds will benefit from the abundance of food and nesting opportunities.

Small Mammals:
Hedgehogs, voles, and shrews will use the cover and feeding opportunities provided by the stumpery and grassland.

Bats:
We already know bats are present in the park, which is a strong indicator of ecological health. They rely on insects for food and use trees and structures for roosting. The increase in insect life from the stumpery and grassland will directly support them.

Larger Mammals:
Foxes and possibly badgers may pass through or forage in the area, especially as biodiversity increases.

Why This Matters

This isn't just about creating something that looks natural it's about restoring ecological function.

Modern landscapes often lack:

- Dead wood
- Species-rich grassland
- Clean, connected water sources

By reintroducing these elements, the stumpery becomes a small but significant refuge for wildlife.

It also serves an educational purpose. Visitors can see, often for the first time, how decay supports life—how what appears messy or neglected is actually essential.

Looking Ahead

The stumpery is not a finished project—it's an evolving one.

Over time, we can expect:

- Greater plant diversity
- Increased insect populations
- More visible wildlife activity
- Improved ecological balance

Management will be key allowing natural processes to continue while ensuring the area remains accessible and understood by the community.

Closing Thoughts

In many ways, the stumpery represents a shift in how we think about green spaces.

Instead of controlling and tidying nature, we are working with it—creating conditions where life can thrive on its own terms.

It’s a reminder that even small areas, when thoughtfully designed, can have a big impact.

Thank you to everyone involved in making this possible, and to all of you for supporting the ongoing work in Wickford Memorial Park.

Thank you.

Plants (ground flora, shade & grassland)



- **Hart's-tongue fern** (*Asplenium scolopendrium*)
- **Male fern** (*Dryopteris filix-mas*)
- **Red campion** (*Silene dioica*)
- **Oxeye daisy** (*Leucanthemum vulgare*)
- **Common knapweed** (*Centaurea nigra*)
- **Meadow buttercup** (*Ranunculus acris*)

👉 These thrive in **MG5 grassland** and shaded, damp stumpery conditions.

🍄 **Fungi & Mosses (dead wood specialists)**

- **Turkey tail fungus** (*Trametes versicolor*)
- **Bracket fungi** (various species)
- **Common feather moss**
- **Liverworts** (in damp, shaded लक areas)

👉 These are essential—they **break down wood** and start the whole food chain.

🐞 Invertebrates (the engine of biodiversity)



- **Woodlice** and millipedes
- **Dragonflies & damselflies** (near ponds)
- **Bumblebees** (e.g. *Bombus terrestris*)
- **Butterflies** like meadow brown or small tortoiseshell
- **Stag beetle** (*Lucanus cervus*) – loves decaying wood

👉 Without these, nothing else higher up the food chain survives.

🐸 Amphibians & Reptiles



- **Common frog** (*Rana temporaria*)
- **Common toad** (*Bufo bufo*)
- **Smooth newt** (*Lissotriton vulgaris*)
- **Slow worm** (*Anguis fragilis*)

👉 Logs, damp soil, and ponds make perfect shelter and breeding areas.

🐓 Birds



- **Robin** (*Erithacus rubecula*)
- **Wren** (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)
- **Great spotted woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos major*)
- **Blackbird** (*Turdus merula*)
- **Blue tit** (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)

👉 Many feed directly on insects living in dead wood.

🦔 Small Mammals

- **Hedgehog** (*Erinaceus europaeus*)
- **Bank vole** (*Myodes glareolus*)
- **Wood mouse** (*Apodemus sylvaticus*)
- **Shrews**

👉 The stumpery gives them **cover, nesting space, and food**.

🦇 **Bats (already present in the park)**

- **Common pipistrelle** (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*)

- **Soprano pipistrelle**
- **Brown long-eared bat**

👉 They benefit from:

- Increased insects from grassland & ponds
- Trees and structures for roosting

🦊 Larger Mammals



- **Red fox** (*Vulpes vulpes*)
- **Badger** (*Meles meles*)
- **Grey squirrel** (*Sciurus carolinensis*)