



Horse Chestnut - *aesculus hippocastanum*



The best times to spot Horse Chestnut trees are in late spring when they are in flower or in the autumn when the conkers form.

There are only two mature Horse Chestnut trees in Selsdon Wood. One is just off Vale Border in the strip of woodland between Fields 2 and 3 and the other is the most easterly corner of the Wood just off East Gorse (below right 15/4/12). However there is a large Horse Chestnut in Baker Boy Lane, by the Courtwood Lane gate, which overlaps Selsdon Wood and drops conkers here (below left 10/5/12), and there are also several young trees dotted throughout the Wood. The trees grow quickly and start to bear flowers and fruit at the age of 20 years.



The bark is greyish and scaly and the buds are large, brown, shiny and sticky to touch in the spring. The sticky casings fall off when the buds open and may be found around the base of the tree (left 27/4/12). The large leaves are almost circular and palmate (ie broken up into 'fingers') with 7 leaflets with toothed edges. New leaves have a downy surface and tend to droop as in the photo above but they lose the down and become more rigid as they mature.



The white flowers, in spikes or 'candles', are borne in late spring (above centre 10/5/12). The individual florets are very pretty, looking like little butterflies (see inset). The seed, the familiar shiny, brown conker is produced in a spiny, green case with one or two conkers in each fruit. These are poisonous to humans and horses although deer and sheep eat them safely.

The Horse Chestnut is not native to Britain but was introduced in the late sixteenth century. It tends to be mainly a tree of parks and gardens and is not common in woodland. In spite of its name, the Horse Chestnut is not at all related to the Sweet Chestnut, which is far more common in Selsdon Wood.

Take a spring or autumn walk along Baker Boy Lane, using the small path on the western side that passes beneath several Horse Chestnut trees. Enter Selsdon Wood through the kissing gate half way up the lane and note the huge fallen Horse Chestnut which has broken the boundary fence. Continue along East Gorse toward Farleigh border and look for the Horse Chestnut tree near the bend. In the autumn collect conkers and play the traditional game with friends.

