



**Walks in May** - Our Bluebell Walk on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> May was a great success with the Bluebells looking gorgeous. We were fortunate to have a perfect day for it and 30 adults plus one child, one baby in a buggy and a few dogs turned out to enjoy the afternoon with us. The photograph to the right was taken in Bluebell Grove on the day by Lenny Burns.



We also had a second walk last month on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May on the theme of 'Spring Birds & Flowers'. Again the weather was really kind to us and although Bluebells were over we saw lots of other species and both walks managed to detect our elusive Tree Creeper and to see our famous White Squirrel. Full reports of both events (including lists of all the species identified and a selection of photographs) can be found on the Walks page of our website.

**FSW Charcoal Making Weekend 24-26 May** - Charcoal making is an ancient technique which takes natural logs - which would burn quickly, with lots of smoke and at a relatively low temperature - and converts them into a smokeless fuel which burns slowly and at a high temperature. Charcoal is thus a much better fuel for cooking than wood and was widely used in domestic stoves before the days of gas or electricity - although it is now mainly used for barbequing.



In a process called pyrolysis, the wood is cooked in a kiln to drive out the water and other impurities and once it has reached maximum temperature the kiln is partially sealed to exclude most of the oxygen so that the wood does not burn to ash. The kiln is left to do its work for up to 20 hours but must be carefully monitored during this time to ensure that the seal is maintained and the chimneys must be moved to ensure an even burn. When the smoke dies down and changes colour the kiln is sealed completely to stop the process and left to cool for at least 6 hours.

Since 2011 FSW have held an annual charcoal-making event in our coppicing area in the wood. In past years the work was orchestrated by our local expert, Rob Sowter, but unfortunately this year he was ill so we were on our own although the regular team was ably supported by numerous Friends who dipped in and out throughout the weekend. This is Ted Forsyth's report of the event.

Though we had made a start on cutting the small diameter tree trunks we had collected during the autumn and winter coppicing season, most were gathered in several large piles. For Cyril (our trained chainsaw expert) and I the weekend began on Wednesday when we made a start on cutting these into smaller lengths suitable for the charcoal kiln. We returned on Thursday, when Neale also appeared, and again on Friday with the result that a mountain of small logs was available when work began on Saturday.

Beginning at 9.30 am on Saturday, with Gordon's help, the kiln and other items were transferred from the car park to the coppice site where the kiln was to be placed. Using some of our poles and a couple of tarpaulins Cyril constructed a shelter for the area where weighing of the bags of charcoal would take place but also to act as a refuge if the expected rain arrived – it was needed! The kiln was set up on the six metal flues, bricks, soil and sand were used to block entry of excess air, and the kiln was gradually filled with some of our logs.

Our original intention was to begin the charcoal cooking around 9.00 pm or 10.00 pm but our progress had been so rapid that at 2.00 pm we made the decision to add to the kiln the hot embers required to get the operation started (see right). As soon as the embers dropped into the central hole we had left in piled up logs in the kiln the heavens opened and heavy rain fell. We gathered under Cyril's tarpaulin shelter and watched the steam and smoke billowing out from under the propped-up kiln lid. Once we were convinced that heat was building up in the kiln, judged by the quantity of steam issuing from the top, we dropped the lid into place, sealed it into position, added three chimneys and restricted air-flow, then stood back to keep an eye on proceedings. In retrospect we were too quick in reaching this stage and should have waited little longer before sealing the kiln top. When things are working properly there should be thick opaque steamy clouds coming out of the three chimneys. Each time we looked we could see only thin wispy vapours. The top was getting hotter but heat was taking time to get any lower in the kiln.





Cyril and Neale were to camp overnight but everyone else went home. When I left at 5.30 pm the thin wisps were still reluctant to turn into anything more substantial. I returned at 8.30 pm to see the desired outpouring of steam issuing from the three chimneys, and was told this began at 6.00 pm. We spent some time using bat detectors to pick up the sound of Pipistrelle bats that flew through the overhead trees. When I left again at 10.00 pm I suggested that moving of the chimneys from their present position to the three remaining positions would probably be required around midnight.

I was back again at 7.00 am on Sunday morning to find that the two over-nighters had not been convinced that appropriate conditions had been reached for them to move the chimneys. By 8.15 am all three chimneys had been moved to their new positions and were soon sending out streaming steamy clouds though not as dense as before. It was not long before we were convinced that the process was complete so we removed the chimneys and sealed off all possible air inlets. We would not know whether our first unguided attempt to make charcoal was successful until the Monday morning.

In the meantime, we filled sacks with more of our logs, eventually ending with 61 sacks. During both days David manned a gazebo in the nearby field with a display relating to Friends of Selsdon Wood and also talked about the charcoal process, occasionally helped by others, using Rob Sowter's display boards with photographs.

On returning on Monday, Cyril and his helpers began creating another tarpaulin shelter, this time to cover the kiln and unloading area to protect the charcoal and the bags from possible rain. Anxious to see whether we had achieved any success, we soon opened the kiln and were relieved to see a large quantity of what looked like good quality charcoal. We were joined by Beth Collier, whose name could not be more appropriate for a maker of charcoal (a wood collier). She took on the job of weighing the 3 kg bags while several others passed the charcoal from the kiln across a riddle to remove tiny pieces. Before the kiln was opened we had made various guesses as to how successful we would be, ranging from my pessimistic 20 bags to Neale's 35 bags. By the time the kiln was empty we had filled an estimated 30 bags with charcoal and two bags with brownings (partially charred wood). We also collected 8 bags of the material that had gone through the riddle – charcoal fines, which can be used to improve garden soil.



Our work then went into reverse, dismantling the tarpaulin shelters, putting all parts of the kiln back onto the trailer, and generally transferring everything back to the car park. Some of the bags of charcoal and sacks of logs had been moved to the car park earlier where Heather managed to sell a few to prospective barbecue operators. Apart from the relief at achieving anything at all under adverse weather conditions, we are now more confident that we understand the process better. How about 50 bags of charcoal next time?

**Thanks to Ted Forsyth for this report and the accompanying pictures. For more photos see the Events page of our website.**

**We still have charcoal available for a donation of £7 per bag - please contact us by phone or email if you would like to buy some.**

**FSW Annual Photographic Competition** - Don't forget our 2014 Photo Competition! Please send in up to 6 of your favourite photographs taken in Selsdon Woods between 1<sup>st</sup> September 2013 and 20<sup>th</sup> August 2014. Details of how to submit your photographs can be found on the website.

**Open Day 2014** - We are already planning the 2014 Open Day to be held on Sunday September 7<sup>th</sup>. If you know of any hobbyists or craftspeople who might wish to display their wares do please get in touch with us and we are always open to offers of items for prizes or for our white elephant stall.

**The weather in the past week seems to have given the lie to the old adage about the Oak and the Ash. The Oak was out almost a month before the Ash but the summer so far has not been the predicted "splash" but, sadly, definitely more of a "soak"!!!**

**Let's hope the June weather is better so that we can all enjoy the summer in our beautiful woods ☺**