

Park Pitt – Address to Council

Wildflower Wipeout

Every year we are treated to the glories of the English spring – birds sing, the leaves come out, the sap rises and our spirits soar, so too the wildflowers spring up, festooning the verges and green spaces still remaining in our city, yellow, white, purple, red, burrs to bells, petals to peas, a multicultural, multi-coloured riot of life of every shape and hue, their names redolent of beauty - marigolds, poppies, cinquefoil, pennywort, hair's tail grass, dandelions, bluebells and brambles and that sticky stuff.

The butterflies flutter, tortoiseshells, the painted ladies, Blues, in a complex ecosystem that brings life to the city and joy to our hearts.

Then along come the Oxford City Council mowers and smash it all up, yes it's the annual May Day Massacre, and this wonderful effusion of life and joy is razed to the ground in a senseless and brutal destruction and the garden of Eden is reduced to ugly grass.

With each successive cutting there are less seeds and less flowers next year, and, as only the grass survives this savage and wholly pointless assault, can we wonder it is seen as a mess?

Can anyone here explain to me what is so attractive about grass cut less than an inch of its life? Monotonous, one dimensional, an artificial ecological desert almost devoid of life and its sustenance, with all the charm and subtlety of a freshly scrubbed lavatory - and yet so appear our verges and too much of our parks.

What is this Victorian impulsion to tame nature, cut back and kill, impose order on "chaos", to stake our claim, as if nature were our enemy, stay back foul fiend! This is ours! Keep Out!

Is this a reflection of us? Is that really who we are? Is that it?

We would rather dominate a desert than share paradise.

How did this happen? The officers I have spoken to are dedicated, hard-working and helpful.

Lets start with the Green Spaces Strategy, misnamed as it is not "a plan of action" but just aims. It scarcely mentions biodiversity, and then in the context of SSIs. Verges are not even considered green space, the precious wildflowers are simply to be tidied up along with the bins by Streetscene.

Our lips drip with the cant of the new church of Green, ecology, environment and emission reduction, yet there are two ways to cut carbon – reduce production, or increase absorption, so why this war on wildlife?

If we love and treasure our wildflowers and the birds, butterflies and all creatures great and small that depend on their habitat, why are we destroying it with such misplaced zeal?

What can we do?

Lets start by adopting the recommendations of Alan Titchmarsh and The Charity Plantlife that demand that all councils should not cut any verges prior to the end of August and before the end of March.

But he is talking about 100's of miles of rural verges in Oxfordshire alone, but in the urban context, with so little green space left, these are much more precious, and we must go much further to save our ecological heritage.

Lets rip up the grass that has become dominant due to decades of mismanagement.

Bring in the ecologists, horticultural experts, - the scientific jury is out as to the degree to which exotic species compete with native ones. Involve the Friends of this, that and the other, let low traffic areas in parks return to nature, and provide grants for planting.

In Headington for example, engage the Oxford Preservation Trust, Ruskin College, Headington High ask them to review their mowing and planting strategies, there are large private green spaces in Headington where scarcely a single wildflower exists among hectares.

Lets reduce the energy inefficient, gas guzzling co2 producing, water absorbing, ecological deserts called lawns, lets plant according to ecological value and not just ornamentation.

Lets say farewell to the silent spring, senselessly smashed.

I dream of a Headington where Cuckoo Lane is once again a riot of colour and a haven for wildlife, a walk of choice, where the verges of Dunstan and Osler Road flower late into the year amongst the buzz of insects, and children pick posies in Bury Knowle Park and take them proudly home to their mummies and daddies, where wildflowers are regarded as our friends and companions, to be kept close, nurtured and cherished in a city we should not call just our own.

Thank You.

This page is intentionally left blank