

# FRIENDS OF FOOTS CRAY MEADOWS

ISSUE 1

NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2006

## An Introduction

**W**elcome to the first Newsletter of the Friend of Foots Cray Meadows, I hope you find it both informative and enjoyable. I would like first to outline the development and current position of the group. Around this time last year Bexley Council took soundings as to the public appetite for this group. There followed a series of public meetings, the success of which both identified a need for this group and a healthy supporter's base. Interested persons further met up to discuss and form the group. There came a point when the talking needed to stop and the willing band just had to get started. We did that by forming an interim committee and spending considerable winter night hours; identifying the aims of the group structuring the committee, writing a constitution and building a programme of events and activities to make the group into a viable organisation ready to hold an Annual General Meeting and build on success. Our first contact with our supporters came with the public meeting last June. Followed by the tree walk in August.

The programme is well under way and this newsletter is one of many key stages of our development. You will get an insight from the articles by my committee colleagues, the content of this newsletter, our events and future activities, of the enthusiasm, abilities and commitment of the group's first committee. For me the meadows are a beautiful open space close to my home, all too easy to take for granted with a passing glance at the wildlife and environmental issues. The Friends of Foots Cray Meadows is a personal opportunity for me to increase my awareness, and contribute to my neighbourhood and natural environment.

Foots Cray Meadows are a magnificent landscaped open space which has survived to nestle within the suburban sprawl at the outer limits of South East London. It serves us well and deserves our protection, we the public should have access, and we do: to go for a walk, to walk the dog, for wildlife appreciation, for tranquility, for a family picnic and even riding a pony. This then is the basis of our aims and the challenge for the Friends of Foots Cray Meadows. Which I like to sum up as Conservation, Learning, Responsible Management and Sensible Public Use. The statutory authority for

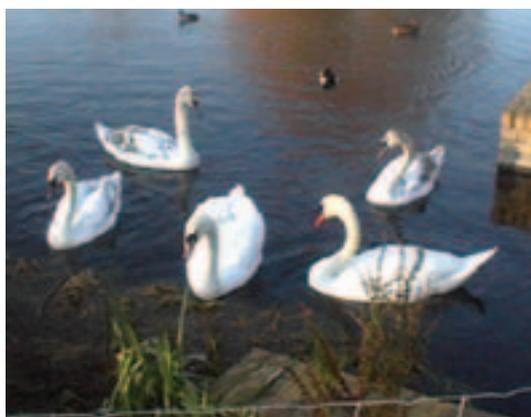
Foots Cray Meadows is Bexley Council they have the infrastructure to deliver the day to day management and necessary control of the meadows. Given the demand to meet the varied expectations of us all, the exercise of maintaining the open space with finite resources, is a daunting and often thankless task. A vibrant and effective friends group can be, I believe a worthwhile and effective addition to the Council's Parks and Open Space Team. My thanks here to Mark Taylor for his continuing logistical support to the group during this 'set up' period. With a fully functioning group this partnership needs to continue, our successful group working together with local communities and other groups who visit the meadows will become an integral part of how the authorities engage with users of the meadows. My aspiration is that we will become a respected advisory group: supporting, questioning and above all contributing to the upkeep of the meadows.

Our contribution will be the key measure to our success. We will do so by: actions and events, by seeking independent finance for and delivering locally inspired projects which are compatible with our aims. By earning the accolade 'the voice of the meadows'. Our exciting first project is a Wildlife and Visitors Centre for Foots Cray Meadows. Working with the Parks and Open Space Team we are planning to renovate part of the utilities building situated near the old stable block. This will become a base for group activities by us and other organisations. Our long term aim is to be able to open the centre; staffed by volunteers, for people to learn more about their visits to the Meadows. The Friends now have over 100 supporters on the list.

I believe the formation of the Friends, is an exciting opportunity for the Meadows. My special thanks to my committee colleagues for getting us this far. There is so much more to do. We are committed to developing our full potential and meeting the challenge of our aims and objectives. Only with your continued support and participation, will we make a difference for the local environment and communities in and around the Meadows. Please join us today.

**Michael Heath** *Chairman*

# A Love of Foots Cray Meadows



**A** though Friends of Foots Cray Meadows have only been running officially since March 2006, we have already managed a few public events and a few more events for committee members.

We agreed an 'in progress' constitution on March 1st 2006 and since the one thing that all the committee members have in common is a love of Foots Cray Meadows, the first thing we thought to do was to get to know each other during a walk around the area. We did this on Saturday 22nd April and also visited the proposed Wildlife Information Centre for the first time too!

Our next priority was to let the general public know we were up and running so we planned our first public meeting for 7th June. We were all quite surprised but very pleased when over 60 people turned up and for the most-part seemed to share our views of what would benefit the Meadows. We got many more supporters' details on the night and gained some useful contacts for other events going forward as other sympathetic local groups were represented.

As all the committee members agree the best way of promoting and preserving the Meadows is to get people out enjoying them we plan to have many outdoor events every year. So the committee members could be generally informed about



the trees for the next planned public event we had a brief walk with the tree expert who was to accompany us, on Saturday 22nd July.

Then to start our program off we held a public walk themed 'Know Your Trees' on Friday 11th August. Again we were all very pleased when over 60 people turned up – especially considering it had threatened to rain all day! Another great highlight was a



Grey Heron flying over our heads, as if on cue, just as Ralph was directing our attention to the skies above as numerous House Martins were feeding! Even though the attendance figures were similar to our public meeting there were still some new people and again we got some new supporters' details. The Friends now have a supporters list of over 100 and we hope that following this newsletter many of these will become fully fledged members, will this be you?

We would like to thank many of you for your support so far and hope to see you at the upcoming events where we can continue to enjoy this beautiful place and share ideas on how best to both preserve and improve it (details under "Dates for your Diary").

**Siobhán Trethewey** *Secretary*

# Wildlife Notes



**S**eptember heralds the official start of autumn but in recent years seasons have become blurred for wildlife and for us. For some migrating birds autumn has always begun in July, but for most significant changes begin now. During our "Tree Walk" in August we noticed how the trees were being affected by the long, hot, dry summer – leaves turning brown and branches being dropped. Over the next few weeks those leaves will change colour into beautiful golden browns eventually dropping to reveal open woodland spaces. During October and November look for the growth of fungi in the shaded damp areas – or join the field trip on November 11th to discover the variety and their names. Also on our walk we noticed House Martins and Swifts, the former feeding above the trees the latter making their last feeding forays before departing for the southern hemisphere. Swifts are amongst the last of the summer migrants to arrive, early May and the first to leave with the last usually being seen during mid to late August. Swifts, long angular sickle like wings and completely dark in appearance, are remarkable birds spending almost their entire lives on the wing: it is thought some can spend 3 years flying without coming to land, even sleeping and mating in mid-air with just the females coming to buildings to nest. By now the House Martins, along with Swallows will be feeding up before they make the journey to sub-Saharan and South Africa.

The bare trees will reveal better views of Great Spotted Woodpeckers – noisy and with large white patch on their wings. The Meadows have, over the years, also been host to the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a species becoming increasingly rare, particularly in Kent. Smaller than the Great Spotted, sparrow sized with white barring on the wings instead of the large white patch. Look also for Jays collecting acorns to fill their larders in the woodland areas. Around the mown amenity grass you will probably have noticed Crows and gulls gathering in flocks, another sure sign of autumn. They will be feeding on insects and invertebrates. Look amongst the gulls and you might notice the difference between Black-headed (which have lost their dark brown caps) and Common Gull with the possibility of a Lesser-black Backed amongst them. Later, as winter arrives, and particularly in cold, harsh conditions you might notice that in addition to the resident Mistle Thrush feeding on the grass, there will be small flocks of its close relatives - Redwings and Fieldfares, visitors from continental Europe finding warmer weather and more food. Indeed during the coming months more and more birds will be arriving from northern Europe: Robins,

Blackbirds, Starling being the most obvious.

Along the River Cray and around Five Arches you will also see changes. During the summer months the duck species will have been in eclipse plumage (when males moult all their colourful feathers and look much the same as the dull females). The two most obvious species around Five Arches are Mallard and Tufted Duck – by the end of October the males should once again be in their best dress ready for another breeding season with courtship display being seen as early as January. They might be joined by Pochard (grey with reddish brown head). Little Grebe numbers will have increased by now and between 8-12 have been seen around the island and upstream vegetation – they tend to be quite secretive, diving for a few seconds popping up close to the banks. The colourful Kingfisher along with Grey Wagtails become more obvious as the need to feed in shorter days becomes more intense. Winter is also the time to look for the elusive Water Rail, skulking along the edges or amongst damp areas turning over leaves for food – similar to the black Moorhen (red/yellow bill/forehead) but brown with a long, red, down-curved bill. Sadly we lost our Mute Swans in the Spring, however soon after Christmas might be the time to look for new arrivals as first year young swans will soon be forced away from their parents and be looking for new sites to set up home – with swans breeding elsewhere in the borough and at Ruxley Gravel Pits the chances are hopeful.

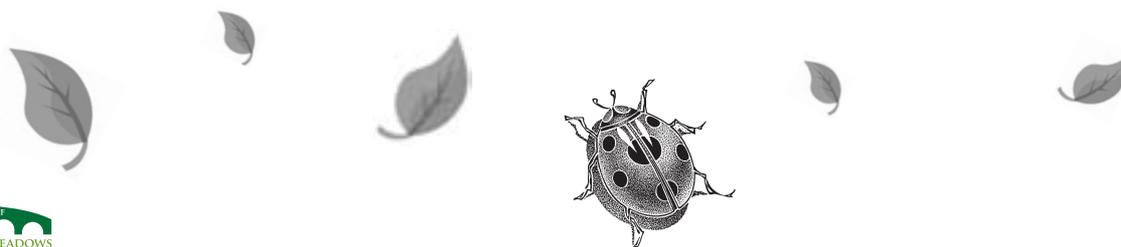
Dragonflies, damselflies and butterflies are generally expected in the warm summer months but in recent years some are still being seen through to November. The large Southern Hawker dragonfly (black and green body with two blue spots at the tip) is one that hangs around into Autumn whilst Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock and Red Admiral butterflies take advantage of the warmer weather often experienced in October and November to fly around the wild vegetation. This year we have experienced a particularly high number of the migratory Painted Lady butterfly, orange with black and white wing tips. So, there is a great deal to look for during the coming months. Both myself and the Sidcup & District Natural History Society would welcome any records of species seen during the past year or coming months – please send them to me and I'd be happy to pass them on.

Thank you.

**Ralph Todd**

*rbtodd@todds9.fsnet.co.uk*

*(9 Horsham Road, Bexleyheath, DA6 7HU)*



# A Message from Sidcup and District Natural History Society



**T**he Sidcup and District Natural History Society will celebrate its 60th anniversary in 2007. Over the past 60 years they have held many field trips in Foots Cray Meadows and to commemorate this forthcoming milestone they propose to publish a report on the flora and fauna of the Meadows. Members have been surveying, gathering and submitting data on flora and fauna during 2006 (Friends are invited to two of their last field meetings in November and December) with a view to comparing the status now with previous years. Any Friends with their own records for this or previous years (no matter how common you think they might be) can send them to the Vice-President, Tony Banks, 15 Boundary Road, Sidcup, DA15 8SS.

## The Stable

**T**he work is progressing well. It's difficult to draw the line between repair and renewal, which areas to re-point and which to leave? The ornamental gates that were endowed with a sum of public money some years are in the process of being properly restored and they are due back soon. It is hoped the restored gates will be situated centrally in the new wall to the front of the property putting them firmly in public view. The gates would be between pillars to replicate the existing. These were in fact installed by Mawson in around 1920 and are described in his book as 'antique Spanish gates' so they have only been in their current location for less than 90 years and moving them some 40 metres or so in no way diminishes the historical context, indeed they were installed as part of the remodelling of the grounds for Lord Waring.

**Barry Morgan**



# Foots Cray Meadows Habitats – *what changes – what challenges?*



A personal view by Vice-Chairman Ralph Todd

**A**t the launch meeting in June and during the Tree walk there was an opportunity for Friends supporters to raise issues and discuss a whole range of interests relevant to the meadows – large amongst them was the management of the various habitats. Perhaps the Friends Group can try and assimilate those questions and discuss with the Council, even influencing some changes where appropriate. But what changes would you like to see? Some might say they would like the meadows to be as they were originally but what does that mean? How far back in history do you go? Perhaps to go back to the mid 18th century when two estates dominated the meadows could be a good starting point? They could look quite different to now but would also mean possibly more formality?

With over 100 supporters it is possible there could be over 100 different views on what you would like to see. I guess you could break the habitats of the meadows down into three major types – grass, trees and water.

In the mid 18th century mown grass of the parkland might well have been the dominant feature, perhaps cattle, sheep or deer grazed some parts – is that what the meadows should be now? Well, apparently not, as most comments suggest the wild areas of meadow seen today are much appreciated, indeed some would have the whole estate un-mown with just a few defined pathways to allow access. Even meadows have to be managed – how and when do you do that? Grazing or mowing? The Council might well be able to answer those questions but I suspect grant funding bodies (Stewardship schemes etc.) might dictate when and how in some areas. However, perhaps there should be a balance between some mown amenity grass and large areas of wild meadow - the Friends might like to consider and influence if appropriate.

Trees - the basis of possibly the most contentious habitat type. Trees are like friends, always there, sometimes taken for granted and leave a great gap when they've gone.

Well, as I've already suggested much of the historical site - "parkland" - was designed by "man for man" and that determines much of the historical planting regime. Not so North Cray Wood of course, defined as Ancient Woodland, probably planted so the timber could be used for shipbuilding and other purposes of the period. As such it would have been managed. Today it continues to be managed, sometimes resulting in the removal of trees. However, there are some great benefits to wildlife – regeneration and growth of under-story, bluebells, wood anemones, butterflies and warblers, all benefit from such management and much welcomed.

The Lime Avenue is very much a feature of the North Cray Place Estate and is now perhaps the only physical and visual reminder of the estate and, I would suggest, should remain so.

There are many other trees of a whole host of species that perhaps seemed appropriate to plant all those years ago but with current knowledge of bio-diversity and the needs of our native wildlife some of those should be replaced? Within the Council's own Bio-diversity Action Plan is the proposal to protect where it exists and re-establish the Black Poplar – something I hope we all support.

Finally, water - The River Cray and Five Arches offer perhaps the most exciting and interesting habitat within the meadows, one which plays host to a great variety of wildlife that can be seen and enjoyed by the many users of the meadows. As was emphasised during the Tree walk, much, if not all, the adjacent land is flood plain for the river and as such the habitats growing within that area reflect a damper environment. But what is happening now? When did the river last flood? What has happened to those marshy areas that were evident just a few years ago? As a regular birdwatcher and collator or bird records not since 1997 has a Snipe, Jack Snipe or Woodcock been recorded (to my knowledge) and those in decreasing numbers? Perhaps the water shortages, lack of rain and general "climate change" are factors. The Council have attempted recently to reinstate one area of wet grassland but should it do more to create more marshy areas? How would Health and Safety issues impact on such a scheme? Would parents want more wet areas when children are ever present, playing and running along the river's edge? Such a habitat would add greatly to the bio-diversity of the meadows.

Wildlife in general and birds in particular are very vulnerable to disturbance, none more so than those living in and around the river - beautiful Kingfishers, Grey Wagtails and dragonflies depend on the clean undisturbed waters for breeding and feeding. I wonder if dog walkers realise the impact of disturbance that encouraging dogs to leap into and run in the river by throwing objects to be collected has? With the whole meadows to allow dogs to run and collect thrown objects, I wonder if the Friends would encourage the adoption of a policy to try and stop this disturbance?

One thing I suspect, never in historical times (whichever period you chose) will the meadows have been so heavily used by an increasingly demanding and diverse human population.

So, I hope these few personal observations –will provoke more discussion (and hopefully letters/articles for future newsletters) and challenge us, the Friends Group to work with the Council to develop and promote an understanding of the needs of the wildlife, improve bio-diversity and continue to make the Meadows a fantastic place to enjoy for us and future generations to come.

Ralph Todd – August 2006

# Meadows Management Update

As the owner of the Meadows Bexley Council are responsible for the management of the site. We thank them for the following update.



Compared to other sites such as Danson Park or Hall Place, Foots Cray Meadows doesn't have high levels of maintenance work. However there are still many annual tasks that do need to be undertaken as well as one off projects and activities and the following are a few of the items currently or shortly to be underway in the Meadows:

## WILDFLOWERS

The annual cut and take on the wildflower meadows that are under Countryside Stewardship will have taken place by now. This may look severe but it's required to keep the fertility of the soil down so to encourage the more delicate plants - allowing their seeds to reach the soil. It also aims to reduce the more aggressive grasses from completely dominating the area. There are some concerns that this operation is undertaken too early and although we follow the recommendations from English Nature we will be asking them for a review in the future.

## COPPICING

Many of you will have noticed the sycamore removal and the hazel coppicing in the parts of North Cray Wood and asked why that took place last year. The sycamores were blocking out too much light and stopping oaks, ash and other native trees as well as the ground flora from growing. If we let the sycamores dominate the woodland we would lose a lot of the insects and birds that rely on the other trees and plants. You only have to look at the increased insect and bird life in these coppiced areas compared to the darker adjacent sections of the wood to see

this has been very successful in encouraging the blue bells and other wildflowers to thrive. The coppiced hazel is growing back well, but so too are the sycamores, which is why we have had to treat some of them with a herbicide. We have also planted a number of young oaks in the coppice areas and they have mostly survived the hot summer and so should really start to grow next year. In the coming months we will be undertaking more removal of sycamores as this is a long term programme that will regenerate much of the woodland. We will not be removing large oaks or ash.

## FOOTS CRAY PLACE

We have plans to reveal the site of the old Foots Cray Place, the 18th century house that once dominated the landscape. The previously impressive terraced gardens have been lost and so too has nearly all evidence of the formerly elaborate gardens that surrounded the house. The Parks team would like to see the remains of this once great house revealed (where possible). This autumn/winter we are looking to start this by removing the scrub growth that covers the terraces, some of the young aspen and sycamore trees that have grown up over the site of the old house. We want to regenerate the surviving formal trees, such as the yews.

This will help visitors get a feel for the grand building and gardens that were once here and hopefully encourage them to further look into the site's rich history. Plans are not confirmed yet and we will consult with local groups and provide information to the public once work is set, but we hope that in years to come we can uncover and preserve more of that which made Foots Cray Meadows what it is today.

## TREE PLANTING

You may have noticed that each year a number of new trees, mostly oaks, with some horse chestnut and limes, are planted around the Meadows. This year even though they have all been watered many have suffered greatly and died in the heat. This is sad but unavoidable; these will be replaced this winter. However, you probably have not noticed the large number of small (whips) planted in areas such as near to the Bexley Lane entrance. These trees attract less attention of vandals and due to their smaller size have more chances of surviving dry periods. We are pleased to see that like the small trees planted in the coppiced areas, most of the whips have survived.

**Parks Team, Bexley Council**  
[parks&openspaces@bexley.gov.uk](mailto:parks&openspaces@bexley.gov.uk)

# The Park Ranger – An Introduction

**P**ark Ranger John Codlin is one of the more familiar faces on The Meadows and here John tells us about his role and background:

“I worked at Ward Security as a Park Warden, what interested me about the post was the fact that I would be working out in the open (a big change from working in an office). I started with Ward in early May 2005 and being based in Foots Cray Meadows (but with around 23 other parks and open spaces to attend to) I enjoyed meeting the various people who used the park and it's diverse nature.

Being a keen fisherman and recently joined member of the RSPB I have always been interested in nature and wildlife so when the opportunity to fill the role of Park Ranger became available I was naturally very interested and on the 4th July I joined Bexley Council.

As mentioned before I cover not only Foots Cray Meadows but all the parks in the Bexley area from the A2 across to the A20 and north to Longlands Road, these sites include The Glade, Sidcup Place, King Georges Playing Field, Waring Park, 23 in total.

My duties are mostly dealing with any issues of anti-social behaviour either whilst in progress or as a result of. With such a large area to cover it is mostly reacting to problems. But I also undertake other duties such as site inspections to look for possible hazards and health and safety issues, maintenance work required etc. I also liaise with various contractors to obtain estimates, issue work instructions etc. I drive around in the a Bexley Council, Green Land Rover, so if you see me in the Meadows or elsewhere on my duties please feel free to say hello or ask any questions that you have.”

**John Codlin**



## Committee Members:

- **Chairman** - Michael Heath.
- **Joint Vice Chair** - John Harrington.
- **Joint Vice Chair** - Ralph Todd.
- **Treasurer** - Gill Burgess.
- **Secretary** - Siobhán Trethewey.
- **Membership Secretary** - John Burgess.
- **Website Manager** - Paul Trethewey.
- **General Committee Members** - Jane Carr Hyde, Margaret Dodd, Nick & Lesley Grant, Bridget Harrington, Vera Heath, Carol Jeffs, Hilary Pam.

We are looking for a Publicity Manager, Events Manager & Vice Secretary. Please contact us if interested.

FRIENDS OF  
FOOTS CRAY MEADOWS

# Dates for your Diary: Future Events

We hope you are interested in joining in our many events we will be hosting this autumn. At all events there will be Committee Members attending. Dates (where known) and a brief description are below; look out for publicity in the weeks running up to each date. For further information please contact the Secretary on [mrst.redhed@gmail.com](mailto:mrst.redhed@gmail.com) or 020 8300 1906.

## ● 28th October:

### RSPB Feed the Birds Day with Bexley Local Group

*Meet in the car park at 10 am*

Feed the Birds Day marks the clocks going back and the winter nights drawing in - it's the time when birds and other wildlife need a little extra help as the first frost looms. RSPB Feed the Birds Day is a great opportunity to step up your feeding to help garden birds through the cold months ahead. Meet in the car park at 10.00 where there will be bird food and feeders for sale, some information regarding bird feeding, followed by a walk of approximately 2 ? hours around the Meadows (bring binoculars)

## ● November Friday 3rd

### Sidcup & District Natural History Society On the Trail of the Crane: an indoor illustrated talk by Ralph Todd

*Meet at Hurst Road Community Centre 7.45pm (£2 non-members of S&DNHS)*

A family of birds I have found to be most attractive and charismatic. That they live in some wonderful areas of the world is an added bonus. Of the 15 species in the world I have seen just 9 and photographed 7 but what experiences they have given me. Journey to

South Africa to the Cape region for the Blue Crane and also enjoy the wonderful plants and other wildlife. The rare Siberian Crane took me to China and India where we also met up with Sarus Crane and had a very close encounter with the majestic Indian Tiger. North America and the states of Texas and New Mexico where the rare and endangered Whooping Crane hangs on but the Sandhill Crane can be found in tens of thousands. Finally, Europe and the Common Crane which breeds in Northern Scandinavia, I have followed its fortunes on its migration route from Extremadura in Spain, through Northern France into Sweden where they congregate to fulfil their courtship ritual and dances. A wonderful mix wildlife and cultures through 4 continents brought together in pursuit of one enigmatic species - the Crane.

## ● 11th November:

### Sidcup and District Natural History Society Fungus Foray with Keith Palmer

*Meet Leafield Lane 9am*

This walk will reveal a fascinating variety of fungi found in the woods and grassland of the Meadows and with Keith's knowledge and skills a sizeable list of species should be found.

## ● 9th December:

### Sidcup and District Natural History Society Birds and Plant Challenge

*Meet Leafield Lane 9.30 am-12.30pm*

A pre-Christmas nature walk with enthusiasts - perhaps you might not expect to see many plants at this time of year but who knows? Will you find more species of bird or plant? Come along and find out.

## ● 14th December:

### Manatees, Marshes & Meadows; Indoor Talk by Ralph Todd

*(£3 for non members and £1 for members of FFCM)*

Following a sponsored project to monitor Manatees in Belize this talk compares some of the conservation issues shared by these extraordinary creatures and the wildlife in Bexley, in particular Foots Cray Meadows. After the hour talk there will be some time to ask the Chairman any questions you have about the Friends group and a small glass of wine and mince pie! Venue: - Scout Hall, St Mary and St Joseph's School/St Luke's 6th Form College, Chislehurst Road, Sidcup (secure parking).

## Join Today Membership costs just £4 per household annually

The Friends Of Foots Cray Meadows is a voluntary group funded by its membership & fund raising activities.

### Membership will grant you:

- Seasonal Newsletters that will include updates on projects.
- Reduced admission on any talks or events that we are not able to host for free.
- Additional Meadows related contacts, whether you would like help with getting an event off the ground or simply would like to share some ideas or concerns regarding Foots Cray Meadows.
- Early notification of meetings, events and talks.

### Money raised will help to:

- Fund projects that will both protect and benefit The Meadows.
- Encourage interest & enthusiasm in the area.
- Organise outdoor events & talks.
- Improve facilities (initially the Wildlife Information Centre).

*Any names and contact information gathered by The Friends Of Foots Cray Meadows will only be used by themselves or Bexley Council on their behalf and not passed onto any third parties.*

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Children's Names (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed is my/our subscription. £4

Enclosed is a donation to The Friends. £ \_\_\_\_\_

*Please make cheques payable to:*

**Friends of Foots Cray Meadows**

*and send them along with your completed form to:*

**John Burgess**

**FFCM Membership Secretary**

**168 North Cray Road**

**North Cray**

**Kent DA14 5EL**

