

The other deer herd across the Thames

by Michael Davison

We are so familiar with our own precious deer in Richmond Park that it's easy to forget that less than two miles away there roams another equally spectacular herd in Bushy Park. A reminder of this wealth of local wildlife came at a "Deer Evening" held in the Market House at Kingston in April, attended by the Friends of Richmond Park and the Friends of Bushy and Home Parks. The event was part of a highly successful two-week Market House Festival organised by Marilyn Mason, co-editor of this newsletter.

Though the deer herd that Bushy Park manager Ray Brodie has to look after in his 1000 acres is half the size of Richmond Park's, numbering 125 red deer and 335 fallows, the problems he faces in looking after them are similar to those of our own manager Simon Richards: combining wildlife interests with those of human visitors . . . deterring deer from ring-barking and ruining young trees . . . clearing litter that the deer might eat. . . preventing dogs from running wild. There are calls from members of the public who have found "abandoned" baby deer (which of course are not abandoned at all). There was even, said Mr Brodie, a call last summer from a visitor who wanted to know how Park gardeners found the time to prune all the chestnut trees to give them the tidy "browse line". As in Richmond Park, the Bushy Park herds have to be controlled by annual culling. However, in Bushy Park males are culled in September and females in November, unlike the normal Richmond Park pattern of a female cull in November and a male cull in February.

The evening had started with an informative talk on the distribution and behaviour of deer across Britain by Chris Howard of the British Deer Society, familiar to many from his talk at Pembroke Lodge last September.



*Left to right:
Ray Brodie,
Simon Richards &
Chris Howard*

Used as we are to our familiar red deer and fallow deer, neither species is, Chris explained, the commonest of those that are native to Britain or so well established here as to be regarded as naturalised. That distinction belongs to the shy roe deer, known in Britain since the Middle Ages and numerous in woodland and upland areas. Then there are the muntjac, a sharp-toothed killer whose ferocity belies its small size, the sika which was introduced to Brownsea Island in 1896 but swam ashore and colonised the south coast, and the Chinese water deer which escaped from Woburn Park and flourishes in the

Fens. Among the fascinating facts about deer behaviour given by Chris Howard are the amazing power of their senses: deer can see at a mile, and angle their ears separately to pick up sounds from different directions. They spend three to four hours eating every day, but in between they need to pause to chew their regurgitated food, which is why it is important not to disturb deer when they seem to be at rest.

Simon Richards, Richmond Park manager, has delighted Friends many times in the past with his talks and “deer-stalking” walks, but still had new things to tell us about the history of Britain’s deer parks, the fact that in Victorian times Britain exported deer to New Zealand to start herds there, and that during the Second World War Richmond Park’s deer population shrank to 77.

The evening continued with a lively question-and-answer session involving all three speakers. The perennial question of what happens to a deer’s antlers after they are shed seemed to be a mystery to all of them.



Standing next to Chris Howard: Dame Jacqueline Wilson, celebrated children’s author, whose home is in Kingston, probably best known for the Tracy Beaker books, and Children’s Laureate from 2005-2007.

For information about the Friends of Bushy and Home Parks, see www.bushy.org.uk, or contact Pieter Morpurgo (Chairman) on 020 8977 3416, or Jean Smith (Membership Secretary) on 020 8977 9391.

Michael Davison leads walks for the Friends of Richmond Park