

AUTUMN IN THE WYCHWOODS

TIS HALLOWEEN as I start to put down my thoughts on paper. The time of year when witches are reputed to hurtle about the night sky, spooky pumpkin Jack O'Lanterns are glowing in darkened windows, apple bobbing and all the various games that go with making October 31st a fun time for children. I believe the youngsters all enjoy a bit of a scare as long as it is fun and not nasty.

One thing for sure, the night is celebrated much more now than in my young days and the shops stock up with all manner of manufactured creepy things. I rather fancy it's our American cousins who have really introduced its popularity over here together with the dreaded "Trick or Treat" routine.

Groups of little horrors go from house to house wearing grotesque masks, summon you to the door and virtually demand something from you, the "Treat" bit. However if you decline and send them packing, depending on how malicious the little dears wish to be, their "Trick" may not be beneficial to your property!

Apart from expected visits in which case you are forewarned and prepared, the consideration of random calls to elderly people's homes, many who live on their own, must be extremely alarming and could be detrimental to their health.

Probably in keeping with this time of year the wind has been whistling around the tree tops to dislodge leaves at last, which have mischievously

swirled and eddied into all the corners to form rich carpets of russet on the ground. We can have no complaints about this Autumn as we have had beautiful sunny days, very little drenching rain and virtually no frost to speak of, which reminds me of the old country wise rhyme that goes "If ducks do slide at Hallow Tide, at Christmas they will swim. If ducks do swim at Hallow Tide, at Christmas they will slide". So if this is correct we could be in for a nippy Christmas. We shall see.

I have seen flocks of fieldfares flying quite high with their familiar chack-chack call and already I have seen them helping themselves to the hawthorn berries in the field hedgerows, what few there are nowadays. One item I was pleased to read the other day, was that the E.E.C. is encouraging farmers to leave more fields fallow. This in turn provides winter bird seed eaters some food throughout the harsh winter months.

There have been dramatic reductions to flocks of lapwings for instance, and even familiar skylark numbers have gone down. Those beautiful hedgerows that made Britain so British and unique which were grubbed out in their thousands to make us a mini wheat belt were habitats vital to indigenous birds and mammals. They have gone and may never come back and our wild life has suffered accordingly. And what did the far seeing politicians get in return?

Grain mountains, that's what!

(pto)

The last day of October did provide a calm sunny period early on, and I glimpsed what may well be the last butterfly I shall see of the summer, a small tortoiseshell taking the opportunity to find winter lodgings. This butterfly, like the peacock, does hibernate throughout the cold days ahead but whereas the larger peacock snuggles under tree bark for instance, the discerning tortoiseshell prefers more comfortable man-made places like garages, lofts, greenhouses etc.

Next spring on the first appropriately sunny day he will be seen fluttering at a window asking to be let out again. Both these butterflies lay their eggs on young stinging nettles, so if you do have a wild patch in your garden where the stingers grow, please live and let live.

Sadly, at the end of September we lost little "Mary", our tame *barbus d'uccles* bantam hen. She was being fed on the lawn of our marvellous neighbour Reg when a labrador dog came from nowhere, grabbed her and was away as quickly as it had arrived. Having made enquiries we eventually tracked the owner and stated our case.

Not that it benefited our bantam, who was in the moult, and was incapable of escaping anyway.

Would you believe, the same thing happened again! This time exactly a week later – whilst Reg was out the dog took "William".

Fortunately when we went to the dog's owner the cockerel was still alive, although obviously shocked and my wife was able to bring him back home where he responded well when re-united with the other bantams.

"Rossie" the border terrier has recently undergone a small operation at the vet's but as it was rather personal I don't think I'll enlarge on it. Suffice to say he has now forgiven us!

Anyway he has the last laugh on me now as I am about to have a little bit of necessary plumbing to the old ticker.

Have an enjoyable Christmas.

Tony Boardman.

(We hope that Tony will soon be fully recovered from his operation – Ed.)

An overdue note of gratitude from Mark Jessey

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who sponsored me in this year's London Marathon. Thanks to your generosity £1,131 was raised for the David Hills Trust, to provide short breaks for under-privileged children from London's East End. In these times when so many worthy causes are after your hard earned cash, your charity was greatly appreciated.