

COUNTRY PIE

Tony Boardman

IN THE WAKE of February Fill-Dyke, which lived up to its name this year following an unusually dry January, has come March in like a lion as the adage would have us believe and hopefully, out like a lamb. The snowdrops seemed to take an age to show in our part of the world this time but February's needed rain has tended to bring nature back on track once more and springtime is definitely stirring.

Sue and I particularly enjoy walking our three border terriers up the Swinbrook Road turning right out of Fiddlers Hill. On the return journey you can enjoy the beautiful vista of the village of Shipton and beyond the rolling hills towards Chipping Norton, occasionally catching sight of a diesel train like a long caterpillar in progress towards Kingham or Charlbury. I am always fascinated by the way the seasons unfold along that, usually daily journey and at this time of the year the anticipation of the kinder, warmer weather to come is particularly exciting.

We were delighted to hear and at least see one skylark climbing the sky to pour out its familiar song last week and it is good to hear the song thrush in full voice once more. Whether it is because we have the benefit of more considerate farmers in our area but I believe our songbird numbers are beginning to increase slightly which is excellent news. An article in the national papers recently admitted that scientists have agreed that the various chemicals sprayed on farmland *has* been responsible for the dramatic decline in songbird population in the last 25 years.

The accumulative effect of deadly poisons that destroy the pests and plant seeds these songsters feed on, in turn, of course account for the birds themselves.

I am bound to say that crops grown that we consume and don't know about must bear a certain amount of suspicion regarding some of our own human ailments following these spraying programmes. In essence what I am saying is that nature seemed to have its own way of dealing within imbalances of pests in the days of yore and by going back to those, to my mind better days, we need to restore a few more hedgerows to encourage our natural wild birds in particular and to soft pedal those confounded chemicals.

Do you remember the walk we were going on before I got carried away? Noticeable now in the hedge bottom are the early leaves of the arum maculatum better known as the "lords and ladies" or "cuckoo pint". This plant has many names depending on which part of the country you come from. Some I have to confess are of a typically charming if rude rustic nature which I possibly shouldn't divulge (pity tho'). With its darkish flower spike enveloped in a green sheath the Victorians were responsible most likely for giving the name "lords and ladies", but I particularly like the Cornish version of "Jack in the pulpit". Later in the year the fruit forms green before turning bright orange.

Now then did you watch B.B.C.'s "Ivanhoe" which concluded a week or so ago, not everyone's cup of tea I would agree but having an interest in our murky past and thoroughly

enjoying a bit of swash buckling I viewed it enthralled. The blond-haired Saxons of which of course our hero Ivanhoe was one all looked as if a trip to the nearest sheep dip would have been in order.

They were great supporters of King Richard I, who had been unavoidably detained returning from the crusades where he had been giving the Saracens a spot of bother.

In the interim of course the cunning brother Prince John and his Norman consorts, was at home promoting his own designs on the throne of England. In one scene John steps out in to the courtyard to hand a parchment to a helmeted knight, who just happened to be mounted on his horse outside at the time. "Take this to Queen Eleanor in France" he says. The chap grabbed the letter and clattered off as if his life depended on it.

Now forgive me for questioning this situation but bearing in mind that this was England in the 12th century and travelling on land and, particularly sea, was to say the least a trifle on the hazardous side.

Not a sausage did he receive for his trouble. Nothing to cover his expenses or so it seemed. I fancy a modern day envoy would have put it to his liege "Excuse me, Squire do you think you could see yourself clear to letting me have a few readies for the trip?" Not too demanding you understand. Another puzzling thing, wasn't it the Normans or Northmen, in other words Vikings, that had the blond hair and the Saxons who originated from Europe the darker looks?

No matter, spring comes on apace (March 20th) and if the weather is fine and sunny the beautiful brimstone butterfly will awaken from his slumber at this time, usually from the tangled ivy and other such undergrowth. With his definite lemon colouration the brimstone is unmistakable as he goes his way searching for a mate. The fact that they are butter coloured may be the reason that this species of insect is called butterfly. The female is similar in size but is lighter, favouring a limey, white hue. The amorous male usually has to wait a week or two before they are on the wing. Who said in the spring time a young man's fancy!

Shipton-u-Wychwood Parish Hall

Annual General Meeting

will be held on

Thursday, 3rd April at 7.30 p.m.

In the Parish Hall

Everyone welcome