



St. Patrick's Church

Broad Green/Cowley Drive Woodingdean BN2 6TB

St. Patrick's Newsletter



Our Lady of Lourdes

Whiteway Lane Rottingdean

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Churches are open for Mass: please book — see <https://www.ololandstp.org/>

Fr Benny continues to say MASS which is streamed live : 09.30 each weekday, preceded by Adoration usually at 08.30; 18.30 Saturday evening and 10.30 Sunday.

Welcome to the nineteenth “apart but together” e-newsletter (12th Dec 2020)

“Because where two or three have come together in my name, I am there among them.” Matthew 18

Reaching Out

Barbara Bond

He has sent me... to bind up hearts that are broken Isaiah 61

It seems that this year everyone is very keen to get into a spirit of celebration. On my rounds I have come across some very elaborate house decorations, even at the Hospice.

The Memory Tree, which normally stands in the main entrance, has had to move into the garden. There is a magical festoon of lights speaking of hope, beauty and peaceful stillness.

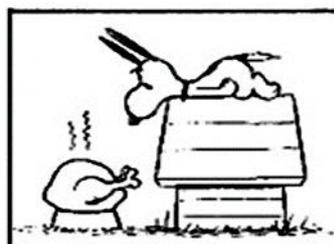
You can't help smiling when you see these displays. It lifts your spirits but it is also a powerful reminder of the words from John's Gospel:

In him was life, life that was the light of all people; and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it. Jn 1:4-5

On the front page of the Observer (Dec 6th 2020) is a very sobering headline about the number of people likely to be alone this Christmas. They estimate 1.7 million people will be alone on Christmas Day and that it is a particularly acute situation for people over 65.

**Longing for light, we wait in darkness
Longing for truth, we turn to you
Make us your own, your holy people
Light for the world to see...**

So maybe instead of another string of twinkling stars what is needed is to bring light into someone's life by finding a way of including them – even a wave or a card goes a long way. We can help to tackle this epidemic of loneliness.



This is the last issue before Christmas – a bumper issue! The newsletter will appear again next year, publication date to be confirmed. Any thoughts to Barbara Bond: bond_barbara@ymail.com

Novena to Saint Francis, for a world under threat

Nine brief reflections asking St Francis of Assisi to pray for us and our world, based on his beautiful *Canticle of the Sun*.

This novena is a song of penitence and praise, guiding us to care for the earth and for our most vulnerable sisters and brothers, especially the Amazon peoples. They are under

Prayer to the Creator

Lord, Father of our human family, you created all human beings equal in dignity:

Pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit, and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter, dialogue, justice and peace.

Move us to create healthier societies and a more dignified world, a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war.

May our hearts be open to all the peoples and nations of the earth. May we recognize the goodness and beauty that you have sown in each of us, and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects, and shared dreams.

Amen

– from Pope Francis' new encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*

grave risk from coronavirus, given their fragile situation, often in remote locations far from government services.

The pandemic shows us that “we have not heard the cry of the poor and our seriously ill planet” warns Pope Francis, describing this as “a time to choose what matters and what passes away”.

(*Urbi et Orbi*, 2020).

Final Novena prayer: Creation

“Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord, all praise is yours, all glory, honour and blessings. To you alone, Most High, do they belong.” (St Francis of Assisi)

“Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*)

Creator God, we praise your world and look with awe on all that is. May we commit to heal the earth and share your gifts in faith and trust.

Brother Francis, in purity of heart you gazed upon the world with love. We ask you joyfully to intercede for us, as guardians of our common home.

St Francis, pray for us.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! The Lord is near. Phil 4:4-5

From the Editor – Barbara Bond

We have come a long, long way together, through the good times and the bad – so says Brighton’s own Fat Boy Slim.

His lyric goes on that he wants to celebrate and praise you. This is not a Christmas song or remotely religious but it powerfully conveys how I feel about the 19 “Lockdown Letters” that have been put together in 2020.

There has been generosity in sharing, support and solidarity and, of course, the mammoth efforts of the technical whizz who turns all this into the finished article (excuse the pun!).

Who knows what 2021 will bring, but 2020 can’t end without heartfelt thanks to one and all!



“May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has called you and he will not fail you.”

1 Thess 5: 23-24

Update

We managed to finish the first section before the weather got too chilly and miserable. We ran out of mulch but farmer Ben is going to bring us another load. He dumps it at the side of the road and we bring along wheel barrows and spades and spread it around the saplings in a thick layer to try and deter choking weeds.

The Woodingdean Wilderness Group and Ovingdean Residents and Preservation Society, along with many other volunteer groups in the city, belong to The Green Spaces Forum. This is a hub for 'green' activity. We've just had our newsletter which you may find interesting as it contains reports from both local groups.



From Winter Newsletter of Brighton and Hove Green Spaces Forum

OVINGDEAN RESIDENTS & PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Many thanks to 'I Dig Trees' for sending us a very healthy batch of native saplings. Volunteers gathered to work, socially distancing, along Greenways Ovingdean, to clear and plant a section of hedge which will connect woodland and allotments to village gardens and our Nature Reserve.

Our Farmer grubbed up some scrub and the old barbed wire fence and we cleared a trench of brambles, mallow and nettles, tin cans and bottles. Our little nursery school children helped too.

Farmer Ben also provided a substantial amount of mulch. We've established a very good relationship with him and he's now keen to plant a copse on a section of farmland so I kept back oak, beech and silver birch saplings for this purpose. All are heeled-in in my garden and, when council permission/estate permission etc. etc. is granted, we will endeavour to plant up in February.

Bernadette Skinner, Ovingdean Residents and Preservation Society <http://www.ovingdean.co.uk/>



WOODINGDEAN WILDERNESS NEWS

From our small beginnings in 2019 we have, as a group, planted 50 assorted trees, coppiced ash trees, took off old tree guards, weeded around saplings pruned out dead wood, litter picked and then cleared the remains of a car that ended up in our Wilderness – several trees were damaged and one oak was lost.

We have worked very closely with our BHCC Ranger Paul Gorringe and have now agreed to do soft maintenance work in the Old Woodland that has been sadly neglected, the bee bank near the woodland burial side and the meadow east of the Memorial Park as well as managing our existing Wilderness area.

It is our aim to bring the whole community together to create a biodiverse and sustainable public green space that promotes wellbeing and quality of life in the Woodingdean area.

A successful funding bid in the Autumn has meant that we can start our bat project and two of our members have recently put up some bat boxes in the Old Woodland We are very excited about this project and look forward to surveying the bats in the Spring.

Another surveying project for next year will be bees and butterflies, 15 different species of butterflies were seen in just one afternoon in July of this year.

“Planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God, still bearing fruit when they are old, still full of sap, still green, to proclaim that the Lord is just. In him, my rock, there is no wrong.”

Ps 92: 14-16

Community News

Fund raising at St Patrick's OUTDOORS!

Irene Green

St Patrick's team are fund raising Saturday 12th December 10am until 12 noon — the third (and last for 2020) - mini Christmas market outside the church.

We are selling:

GIFTS (cards, decorations, toiletries, jewellery, lavender, scarves, games, useful household items, eclectic things like camera lenses and watch straps/watch)

FOOD (Christmas flapjacks, figgy Christmas steamed puddings (GF), mulled apple juice, sweet and savoury swirls, raspberry and white chocolate tray bake (GF), lemon curd cake (GF), blueberry cake, rock buns, fruit pies and crumbles, soups, cheese scones and cheese biscuits, chocolate and hazelnut mini cheesecake (GF), mince pies, individual steamed Christmas plum puddings (GF), ricotta and swiss chard filo parcels, veggie savoury rolls, GF rolls, vegetarian and non vegetarian tartlets).

PRESERVES (Jams: there is more marmalade!! Quince jelly, various chutneys. These are all from garden fruits except for marmalade!)

Do come and have a look, you don't have to buy anything! The list is not exhaustive. Please wear mask, wear gloves or borrow disposable gloves, stay socially distant.

VERY grateful to everyone who has contributed and volunteered so far, it will be amazing. Contact people: Bernadette berskin@hotmail.com, Irene icgreen@ntlworld.com



Christmas Mass

If you wish to attend a Christmas Mass in the parish on 24th and 25th December, there is a great selection with additional Masses but all must be pre-booked.

For Rottingdean please fill in a postcard sized form for Christmas Masses selecting which Mass you wish to attend. There are three Masses on Christmas Eve 5, 7 and 10pm and two on Christmas Day 10.30am and 12 noon. **Return the form to the church or parish office as soon as possible i.e. now.**

If you wish to attend St Patrick's Christmas day Mass at 9am, you must book via a unique Eventbrite link <https://bit.ly/3oBacyL>

We have some space flexibility but have to keep safe.

The Christmas offering to the parish priest

If you want to make an offering to the priest as is normal at Christmas time you can do it in a number of ways. Envelopes will be provided to receive cash offerings.

You can also write a cheque and the following will allow you to choose who to make the cheque out to.

- a) If a parishioner is making a donation on Christmas Day (or in envelopes specifically marked for Christmas offering at any time around Christmas) the cheque needs to be payable to the parish i.e. St Patrick's or OLOL and the parish can also claim gift aid. This money is then separate from parish funds and will be for the priest's use.
- b) If the donation cannot be gift aided it is probably clearer to write the cheque to Benedict O Shea. However, if it is made payable to the parish and in a Christmas envelope, it will still get to Fr Benny as the office will have the records from collections and make sure it is transferred to him.

Although Fr Benny will detest anyone mentioning money, this practice of Christmas giving needs to be kept going for the benefit of future priest(s).

"How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? The cup of salvation I will raise; I will call on the Lord's name. My vows to the Lord I will fulfil before all his people." Ps 116: 12-14

Although the weather is getting a little cold, dull and grim, the Christmas Season somehow always seems to lift the spirits.

The sparkling lights and smiles (under the masks!) keep us all going. Our Masses are bringing the message of hope for the future and the joyous arrival of the Baby Jesus.

We have put our Crib out, very bare and just a couple of animals in it. All the nativity figures are on the window sill, awaiting their moment to start moving.

Mary and Joseph have now started out on their journey and have reached the floor!!

It's surprising how much fun this is, to consider each day what the members of the nativity are doing and physically move them along.

Mary and Joseph must have been so full of different emotions, perhaps similar to how we are all currently feeling, with the Season approaching and the questions of where do we go, who do we meet up with and how to keep everyone safe?

Mum (Teresa Ford) and I have been playing and singing Christmas Carols with full gusto!! It's amazing how good singing is for you and how joyous it will be to sing again in community... I am particularly looking forward to the children joining in with our box of instruments and playing them with whatever rhythm they can find!!



Crib scene (not Helen's!)



After Christmas we have the cold winter months ahead of us, but again there is so much to look forward to.

We have wrapped our Banana Tree up in Hessian and truly hope for it to survive and perhaps give us the joy of home grown bananas !!

Mum (Teresa Ford's) plants from a St Pats sale earlier in the year are still looking fabulous !! and promise a great display again in the Spring/Summer.

A Very Happy Christmas everyone at St Pat's, keep going you're doing great.

Love

Helen, Derek
and Teresa



"All your creatures shall thank you, O Lord, and your friends shall repeat their blessing. They shall speak of the glory of your reign, and declare your might, O God, to make known to men your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendour of your reign." Ps 145: 10-12

Dated 2nd December, by Prof Devi Sridhar, chair of Global Public Health, University of Edinburgh

The Problem

The truth is that the virus that causes Covid-19 does not care that it is Christmas or New Year's Eve. It rapidly spreads indoors and in poorly ventilated settings, particularly in households, when people gather together informally in comfortable and close conditions.

Disinfecting surfaces and sitting 2 metres apart just isn't going to stop transmission. It's best to imagine the virus like cigarette smoke: if one person in the room is smoking, you're likely to smell the smoke. It's the same with this coronavirus: if one person is infected, you could also become infected from the aerosols emitted when they breathe and talk.

As the UK heads into a tiered system of restrictions, the government's decision to relax travel measures over the festive period is particularly concerning. Movement from higher- to lower-prevalence areas means all tiers are more likely to be upgraded after Christmas, with the possibility of the entire country being in tier 3 by early 2021. The virus moves when people move; as data from the past 10 months has shown, restricting travel is an important way to protect areas from Covid.

Effect on the NHS

While we all clapped for months for the NHS staff, we should keep them in the forefront of our minds

The Difficult Choice

With each passing day, we get nearer to effective and safe vaccines, treatments for Covid-19 patients, and effective mass testing. Indeed, next week, the first 800,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine are due to be rolled out in the UK.

Many people may decide that, with mass vaccinations on the horizon, the risk of being infected or infecting others over Christmas isn't worth it. As someone in one of the lower risk groups, I'm less concerned about getting Covid-19 myself than I am worried about unintentionally infecting someone else, contributing to a chain of infections that could result in someone being hospitalised.

There are ways to exercise caution.

If you want to safely see your family, you can *check the local prevalence of Covid cases in the area* – the number of cases per 100,000 people. If there are fewer cases and positive tests results, the risk of catching or passing on Covid-19 is lower.

But of course there is always an element of risk. *Socialising outdoors*, going on walks and spending time in nature with friends and family are ways to see people in a less risky environment. So is *connecting with family and friends "virtually"*, on the phone or on Zoom.

The Test and Isolate solution

If you are keen to spend time closely with family members indoors, especially vulnerable or elderly individuals, the only truly safe way to do so is to isolate for two weeks before seeing them, to ensure you're not carrying the virus or incubating it.

Private providers are now offering rapid Covid tests, but they're not 100% safe because the virus has an incubation period of up to 14 days. You could test negative today, for example, and be infectious and test positive tomorrow. Two negative test results taken five to eight days apart is one way to help mitigate this risk, albeit an expensive one.

this winter. NHS doctors, nurses, support staff and cleaners have to show up each day to work in hospitals and GP practices and deal with whatever is thrown at them.

Relying exclusively on the health service to fight this pandemic is like leaving a goalie alone on a football pitch.

We all need to play our part in keeping the burden off health services. This might mean postponing group gatherings until the spring or summer next year, and doing our best now to avoid getting the virus and passing it on to others.

"The Lord is just in all his ways, and loving in all his deeds. He is close to all who call him, who call on him from their hearts." Psalm 145: 17-18

Advent Seeds

Advent Wreath

Irene Green

The Advent Wreath was first used as Christian devotion in the Middle Ages. It comes from pre-Christian Germanic and Scandinavian cultures, where candles and greenery were used as symbols of light and life during the dark and cold winter. The Advent Wreath has always been a circular evergreen wreath with four or five candles, three purple, one rose and sometimes a white candle for Christmas Day placed in the centre of the wreath.

The candles symbolise the light of Christ coming into the world. The evergreen symbolises renewal and the circular shape the completeness of God. The candle colours come from the traditional liturgical colours of Advent, (purple and rose) and Christmas (white). Over time each candle was given a name and linked to a particular part of the Advent story.

Candle 1. Hope (purple); Candle 2. Peace (purple);

Candle 3. Joy (rose); Candle 4. Love (purple).

You can think about the significance each week as the candles are lit.

Prayers from online sources: join Bishop Richard's advent talks in Arundel Cathedral on Fridays in

December or read the transcripts at: <https://abdiocese.org.uk/news/advent-with-bishop-richard>

Prayers for advent: <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/12-advent-prayers.html>

Join the rosary being recited at <https://therosary.online/>

Advent Prayer Group on Zoom

St Patrick's advent prayer group meets on Zoom at 4.30 on Thursdays 3rd 10th and 17th December.

The presenter on 3rd December (and 17th) will be Frances Low.

St Anne's Day Centre — update 9th December

Bernadette Skinner

Ted went to the centre this morning with his monthly gifts including two money donations from parishioners. They are so grateful for these especially the money. They cook hot nourishing meals for about 60 clients who collect them around midday. The meal bag includes fruit and a chocolate bar if they have them. They are opening on Christmas Day this year. They would rather not have "presents" just items they really need. Gloves (mainly for men), individual fruit juice drinks and chocolate bars... And mince pies! **If you would like to contribute you could bring items to 9am mass at St Pat's or leave things in our porch at 42 Ainsworth Ave Ovingdean.** Ted is happy to deliver to the centre. Brighton College is focusing on scarves and hats; Donatello's is doing a full Xmas dinner for them on the 22nd. If we find out any more information we will let you know.



Last posting date for Christmas

Hard to believe, but Christmas is just over two weeks away - which means the last posting date is nigh!

Choosing the perfect gift for a family member or friend is not always easy, and coupled with the problems around going to the shops at the moment, it may be worth considering a Kanji Gift Card. There is a wide range of different Gift Cards, so you can choose the one that is most appropriate for your loved one. If you order now, we will send your card promptly, giving you time to personalise the card before the last posting date.

To purchase your card, go to: <https://thekanjiproject.org.uk/gift-cards/>

This will take you straight to the secure Gift Card page on The Kanji Project website.

To all of our supporters who have already purchased Kanji Gift Cards, may we extend a huge THANK YOU!



"O Lord, grant us salvation; O Lord, grant success. Blessed in the name of the Lord is he who comes. We bless you from the house of the Lord; the Lord God is our light."

Ps 118: 25-27

Advent Seeds (2)

We are out of step with Pope Francis

Irene Green/CAFOD

Fratelli Tutti

The Vatican released the much-anticipated encyclical by Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, on 4th October 2020 – the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi.

Fratelli Tutti means “all brothers and sisters” and is taken from the Admonitions of Saint Francis.

Some are seeing *Fratelli Tutti* as part of a trilogy of documents.

Evangelii Gaudium called for healing and renewal within the Church

Laudato Si' called us to participate in the healing of our common home.

Fratelli Tutti says that this healing can only be done together, as sisters and brothers in solidarity and social friendship.

Fratelli Tutti is a radical challenge, offering a blueprint for a world after coronavirus.

It turns the world upside down, placing **human dignity at the centre**.

It links back to the message of **interconnectedness** which was also at the heart of *Laudato Si'*.

We are challenged **to turn outwards**, to act as neighbours, and to reach out to all those who are in need.

Also central to this encyclical is the conviction that love for all brothers and sisters will **not shy away from politics**.

This encyclical calls for the creation of a new kind of solidarity to tackle the crises the world is currently facing. Pope Francis calls on us all to **welcome migrants and to resist racism, prejudice and discrimination**.

Love is not only a personal relationship, but it should also be at the heart of our political decision-making:

“Once more, I appeal for a renewed appreciation of politics as ‘a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good’.” (FT, 180)

Fratelli Tutti makes clear that politics is indispensable to the goal of “universal fraternity and social peace” (FT, 176).

In *Fratelli Tutti* we are once again challenged to create a new future, a new model of progress. This new model of progress should give priority to overcoming hunger and poverty, rather than focusing on creating wealth for those who are already rich.

Pope Francis mentions some specific threats to social friendship, peace, and dialogue:

- political nationalism
- racism
- trickle-down economics
- relativism and consumerist individualism
- a lost sense of history and memory
- the death penalty
- the development of weapons of war

We may reflect upon how our parish and faith lives have changed due to lockdown. Can we ask ourselves questions about

- what new ways of ‘being Church’ might be emerging?
- How could such new ways put – at the front and centre – the most vulnerable and the previously undervalued?
- In light of the encyclical’s invitation to consider all our brothers and sisters, how might we be in solidarity with local communities overseas?
- In our choices as consumers and voters, we have a chance to ensure that the money flowing to communities overseas, via aid or trade, supports a just, green recovery for the poorest and most vulnerable people.

<https://cafod.org.uk/Pray/Fratelli-Tutti-explained>

“The God of gods, the Lord, has spoken and summoned the earth, from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Sion’s perfect beauty he shines. Our God comes, he keeps silence no longer.” Psalm 50: 1-3



Do you know who Sarah Catherine Gilbert is? She is a scientist who has moved from biopharmaceuticals to academia throughout her career, and who diverted work to coronavirus vaccine in her lab in north Oxford, in January this year. She works on flu virus, MERS and many others.

She has fronted the development of the safe and effective COVID-19 AstraZeneca vaccine working with a unique piece of “spike” protein in coronavirus. By the end of March she had recruited people on whom to test the vaccine.

There are now about 5 vaccines approved. The job of vaccines is to produce antibodies. Antibody production for research as well as for health has been well established for many decades in laboratories and I made several types. Vaccines are always rigorously tested for safety, so that the benefit from vaccination far exceeds the risk. Two reactions this week were transient and in people who carry an “epi pen”.

A graduate in science usually does research for a PhD, and a couple of 3-year jobs as a post-doctoral worker before having to retrain, become a university lecturer (exceedingly few posts), join biotech companies, or work in major pharma companies – and we don't have many major companies left in the UK.

Most scientists who work in universities are on short term contracts, and the vast majority of people in universities do not have tenured posts. I obtained funding competitively throughout my working life, being funded initially by the Medical Research Council; throughout my career I also received grants from what is now Diabetes UK, the Wellcome Trust and BBSRC – Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council – with whom I had many post graduate studentships, collaborative awards in Science and Engineering between me and a pharmaceutical company. My last post grad before I retired was with AstraZeneca.

Science funding in the UK has shrunk and stayed at a much lower level than in Europe and America since the 1980s, the Margaret Thatcher era. If

governments want to decrease spending, who notices if they cut research grants to scientists? I was part of Biomed programmes in the EU, which allowed laboratories to send scientists to other labs to learn new techniques. The EU funding for full time research work favoured good scientists in smaller universities. The grant applications required information on how the work would benefit ordinary people. While the Medical Research Council funded work on certain health topics, in general most research funding in the UK was for fundamental not applied science.

I am delighted to see the value of science and scientists acknowledged, and having the highest public approval, and in disbelief at the speed of delivery of vaccines against COVID-19. This is entirely due to harnessing the goodwill and expertise of scientists, targeting a problem and giving it the necessary funding.

Science evolves very fast. In the group I joined at the university of Sussex, headed by a medic, there were 12 people; I was the only female scientist there in 1970. Decades later the number of women far exceeds the number of men in the same lab.

The other dramatic change over time is that scientists must collaborate with other groups in order to get funding from research bodies – not applying as an individual as in early times, but as a team. Through collaboration, you ensure you have access to prohibitively expensive equipment and techniques, for example in genomics and proteomics. It's like trading.

Scientists have no career structure but otherwise resemble nurses and teachers and others who work tirelessly because they believe in their work!!

2020 has shown us who the important people in society really are.

“Your word, O Lord, for ever stands firm in the heavens; your truth lasts from age to age, like the earth you created... I will never forget your precepts, for with them you give me life.” Psalm 119: 89, 90, 92

Afterthoughts

Watching for the Light

Patrick Bond

Never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt; think before you do anything – hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil. 1 Thess. 5:19-22 (2nd reading, Mass on 3rd Sunday of Advent)

December in the garden has come with lots and lots of rain. The national news comes also with a deluge of uncertainty and gloom – apart from the vaccine, of course, but its full benefits will take a long time to come through: we will have to be patient. Last week, my mind over-full, I took a walk up Juggs Lane to the Windmill above Kingston. The path is one worth walking just for the sake of the path, the sun made everything shine, and I was grateful for the blessing of just being able to walk out and see it all.



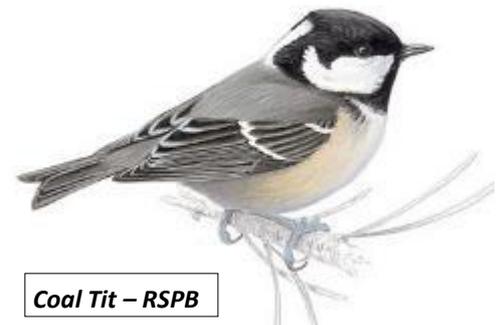
The garden's clay layer holds the rain well, so walking on it is not wholly a good idea. However the long grass makes a good feeding ground for blackbirds, and for chaffinches: two inconspicuous and shy females have been visiting regularly, sitting together in the bare branches of the apple tree before dropping down to feed on the ground.

The other shy frequenter of the garden is the coal tit, smaller than the great

tit and without the black stripe down the chest. The coal tit sports a white Mohican stripe down the back of its head, easy to mistake for the white cheek patches of the great tit. Neither bird will sit quietly and turn its head slowly, for identification, but will insist on dashing, flitting and pecking. Other features help.

The coal tit has a rich cream and buff stomach, plus two white bars on its back when the wings are folded, not one. It flies down out of the tall cypress hedge, perches a moment on the white rambling rose, zips across to the feeder and immediately vanishes into the dark interior of the cypresses. By contrast, the great tit will take the sunflower kernel on to a branch of the apple tree, hold it in its claws and peck away till it is all gone.

Winter is the time when some species gather to feed in roaming flocks. One busy flock acts as a magnet to others, and last week I came down into the kitchen to see at least three: a blizzard of goldfinches, blue tits and great tits. Like a loom of living shuttles weaving back and forth, they were dazzling to see and impossible to follow. Moments later they had all moved on, and the garden was empty and desolate.



Coal Tit – RSPB



Few things are more gloom-laden than heavy clouds in midwinter: I stare out at icy showers which never quite start properly but never seem to stop properly either. Yet out of nowhere a patch of blue elbows its way into the blotchy grey overhead, a glow comes over the ash, beech and sycamore trees which border Love Lane, behind our house; and the few lingering leaves – pallid greens, yellows and oranges – become radiant, gather into a globe of light which hovers amid the shadows, transforming all the gloom.

“O God, be gracious and bless us, and let your face shed its light upon us. So will your ways be known upon earth, and all nations learn your saving help.” Ps 67: 2-3