

walk notes

Cassiobury Park

The manor of Cassio, owned by the Abbey of St Albans, was mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086.

In 1546 Henry VIII granted Cassio Manor to Richard Morison, who started to build the house, which was passed down the male line until 1628, when Elizabeth Morison married Arthur, Lord Capel of Hadham. Arthur was made Viscount Malden and Earl of Essex in 1661. He employed the gardener Moses Cooke to set out formal gardens, and the house was extensively remodelled in the early 1700s by the architect Hugh May. Gardeners Charles Bridgman and Thomas Wright both worked on the estate in the 18th century, and Humphry Repton was commissioned to landscape the park in the late 18th century. As part of this work, a number of lodges and other buildings were built, designed by Sir Jeffrey Wyattville. One of these, Cassiobury Lodge, still survives. The estate remained in the ownership of the Capel family (Earls of Essex) until it was sold in 1922. In 1909, 184 acres of parkland were sold by the 8th Earl of Essex, mostly to Watford Borough Council for housing and the public park.

The house itself was demolished in 1927. Only the stable block remains: this has been converted to Cassiobury Court, an old peoples' home, which still exists in Richmond Drive.

More land for the park was purchased by the UDC in 1930. Construction of the residential Cassiobury Estate began. The land was made subject to restrictive covenants stipulating that only good quality detached or semi-detached houses would be allowed. West Herts Golf Course was bought in 1932 and Whippendell Wood in 1935.

The land between the meandering River Gade and the Canal is a designated Local Nature Reserve managed by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The nature reserve contains "parkland, scrubland, neutral and semi-improved grassland, along with acid and marshy grassland, swamp including tall fen, water-cress beds and alder woodland. In addition there are areas of open water including the River Gade, the Grand Union Canal and a number of ponds."

Former water-cress beds within the park have now developed into marshland and Muntjac Deer and foxes can sometimes be spotted in the woods.

46 different species of breeding birds are present in Cassiobury Park as well as 7 of the 17 bat species which are native to the United Kingdom.

Whippendell Wood

Whippendell Wood comprises of 165 acres of ancient woodland. Since 1954 Whippendell Wood has been designated a Site of Special

Scientific Interest due to the woodland habitats present and its location in a predominantly urban and agricultural setting. The area is well known for its impressive collection of bluebells. The wood contains many hollows in the landscape, up to about 100 metres across and five metres deep. It is unclear whether these are naturally occurring geological features or the result of human activity.

Harrocks Wood

The Harrocks Wood complex managed by the Woodland Trust comprises four broadleaf woodlands; Harrocks, Merlins, Newlands Spring and Dells Wood, extending to some 44 hectares. They are linked with footpaths and are close neighbours of the Whippendell Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which is owned and managed by Watford Borough Council. All together they comprise a large and wonderfully diverse area of public access woodland.

Most of the wood is ancient containing species such as oak, ash and birch. The entire site is covered by a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) and classified as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) due to its historical and floral interest. The soils are typically well drained clay with flints over gravel; and scattered throughout parts of the wood are deep pits, which are the remains of gravel and flint excavations.