

## VILLAGE DIARY

The last of the leaves are drifting down in our gardens and the big tidy-up has started. The frequent rain has not helped. I was quite impressed to find a bittercress plant flowering happily beneath a layer of damp leaves. This odd little weed appeared in our gardens some years ago, introduced, I gather, from garden centre purchases that came with a bonus. It has become really ubiquitous, finding any pocket of damp earth in which to prosper. As the ripe seeds explode at the slightest touch, it is well adapted to colonise.

John Lea writes that the warm spring triggered a wonderful crop of acorns that are now being enjoyed by various species. Jays collect them to store in any nook or cranny they can find in the older oak trees. Wood mice often store them in a raised hedge bank or beneath the roots of a tree. In his childhood, John found large stores under the roots of oak trees stashed away by our native brown squirrel. Sadly it is seventy-seven years ago when, on his way to Sunday school with his older brothers, they saw our last native brown squirrel being chased across the treetops by several greys. The grey squirrel does not believe in such large stores, just digging a hole to bury any items often in a choice place in his lawn. They rely on a marvellous sense of smell to find them in the coming winter.

Several times in recent years, I have found sprouting walnuts in our garden containers where squirrels from the nearby dray in Magotty's Wood have tucked them in. I have tried transferring them to corners in the garden where they may grow on, but the squirrels always find them.

Where birch trees are dying out in Shellow Wood, John planted sixty acorns, prodding holes with a stick, knowing that what the squirrels or wood mice do not find through the winter the rabbits will probably find in the spring when the young trees begin to sprout.

Recently as John rode through the wood, he saw two ears pricked up above the grass only thirty yards away. They seemed too big to be a fox but, as he looked closer, he could see two eyes and turned to investigate. A large dog fox rose sedately and trotted away unconcerned by his presence on a scooter. In full winter coat at the start of the breeding season, he looked magnificent. John has seen a lot of foxes, both dead and alive, but he doubts if he has even seen one as large as this. The fox's bloodcurdling screeches and screams will be echoing across the fields during December's mating season.

Barbara Wilson