

SFPT February 2015 report for Fromus Valley

How old is ancient?

February 11th, and the weather is cold, grey and very still.

A pair of mallard flies from the long pond in the lower meadow. The water is very high and has recently overtopped the bank, sending a small stream across the path to join the River Fromus. A robin is singing, and a great tit flits through the trees overhanging the pond.

There are many molehills. The rich, brown soil thrown up by the moles suggests a large population of their main food — earth-worms. The flora of the Reserve is slowly coming to life, and there are early leaves of lesser celandine, common mouse ear, dog's mercury, herb bennet, primrose, ground ivy and lords and ladies. Hazel catkins are in flower.

The Fromus is busy flowing, eroding and depositing, as it has done since the last glaciation: it nibbles here and there, and then drops sediment downstream at the sides of the channel and on the bends where the current is slower. The small beaches and gravel bars are different on every visit. Exposed roots of large trees close to the river show the erosive power of this little river during prolonged wet weather.

Old woodlands and hedges reveal their antiquity by having features you don't find elsewhere. Meadows are not like that: a farmer may plough and then re-seed the grasses in a meadow several times during his ownership: in more recent history, a farmer would 'improve' his meadow by fertilising (i.e. – the quality of the grazing was improved for livestock.) A few decades later, there is little to suggest what has happened in the past, apart from fewer flowers in the hay.

At the Fromus Reserve, we like to think everything around us is very old, and that is one of the major attractions of the site. We have recent, old, ancient and prehistoric features. The soils of the Reserve and the surrounding Boulder Clay farmland are derived from the debris of a glaciation. They have been eroded by rainfall and frost for thousands of years, and washed down slope.

Streams and small rivers such as the prehistoric Fromus have developed in the creases and folds of the land.

To be classed as ancient, woodlands and hedges need only be 300/400 years old, and although there are many impressive trees on the Reserve, few are as old as that. It was the upwardly-mobile Bigod family that bequeathed truly ancient features to the Fromus Reserve, in their ambitious 13th century earth dam, and also in the spectacular gorge carved by the torrent that drained their great fishpond when the dam failed.

To my eye, the Reserve's landscape is ancient, the hedges and individual trees are old, and the hay meadows are a conundrum. They too are old, but the reduced flora they contain suggests they have been 'improved' – but a long time ago. The absence of anthills shows the meadows have been ploughed in the past, but modern haymaking machinery could have removed them anyway.

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