

Delighting in the Unexpected

In these reflections, I've often mentioned the woodland near to my house. The woodland path is one of my favourite routes for my daily exercise walk. As I begin each walk, I try to put aside the concerns of the day and refocus my mind to observe everything around me. The pace of growth in the woodland, means that every day it seems to offer something new. Anticipation adds to the enjoyment!

However there's one part of the woodland that saddens me. Several years ago, the area suffered some insensitive mechanical clearance. The elegant woodland treescape, beloved by walkers abruptly disappeared. Unlike the rejuvenation that follows well-executed coppicing, this area is now an impenetrable thicket of matted brambles. Perhaps it provides a wildlife habitat undisturbed by walkers but I can't help grieving for what it used to be. I especially miss the spring flowers that used to adorn this part of the woodland.

One day last week I found myself wallowing in the loss of this place. Somehow it seemed to emphasise the loss of everything else at present. But the activity of walking brings with it a momentum that carries us along. As we physically put one foot in front of another, we move on. As we leave one landscape behind, we approach another. The previous landscape remains in the background but something else is ahead of us.

As I left the bramble thicket behind, a shaft of sunlight lit up a flash of pink on the woodland floor. I'm sure my heart missed a beat as I investigated, not quite daring to hope that it might be one of the flowers that I hadn't seen here for a while. To my great delight, the sunlight drew me to an Early Purple Orchid peeping above green foliage. Further exploration revealed four of these very special orchids. And once again, I thank God that the natural world continues to provide unexpected delights in these challenging times.



The discovery of the orchids renewed my energy for walking and lifted my spirits to thoughts of hope and thankfulness amidst loss. During this Easter season these themes are never far from the surface: Christ's terrible crucifixion brought resurrection and amidst the agony of this deadly coronavirus we continue to see acts of selfless courage and kindness.

And just as I'm leaving the woodland with these thoughts uppermost, I spot a single clump of oxlips on an undisturbed bank.



Oxlips are rare flowers, native to this part of East Anglia. Their flowers are paler than the deep yellow of cowslips and their stems are taller than those of primroses. I'm thrilled to see that at least one clump has survived here. Once again our beautiful Essex countryside does not disappoint! It reminds me that when we treat the natural world with care and respect, unique and rare species will survive. And as we head into another week, it reminds me that our commitment to this unprecedented 'lockdown' is a huge act of care and respect for the survival of each wonderful and unique person.

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