

# Friends of Russell Square Newsletter No.6



Autumn leaves in Russell Square Gardens.

## Annual Leaf Feud

Children and animals may enjoy the fun that can be had with piles of plane leaves, but for Russell Square's Volunteer Gardening force the battle to keep up with the leaf fall begins in September, continues throughout October and is still going strong at the end of November.

The object of the exercise is to ensure that the grass does not die beneath this carpet – a worthy aim that keeps the spirits high despite the area one has just cleared being immediately covered again. The hardest part of the job is remembering not to look back.



## Bees are Amazing

While some beekeepers collect the hives they deposited by lorry at nectar-rich August-flowering heather sites, others are harvesting the honey from their hives – leaving plenty for the bees. Honey bees do not hibernate in winter but stay active (buzzing and clustering together for warmth) which means they need a lot of food – about 20-30lbs of honey to survive an average winter. As a hive can produce 50-60 lbs it works out at roughly half for the bees and half for the keeper.

Honey bees fly about 55,000 miles to make just one pound of honey. “Busy as a bee” is hardly a fair expression.

To make honey, honey bees take nectar and mix it with enzymes from glands in their mouths. This mix is stored in the honeycomb cells until the water content has been reduced to a certain level. Then the cell is capped with a thin layer of wax to seal it until needed.

The honeycomb itself is a thing of wonder. The hexagon shape of the cells uses the least material within a given volume so is the most efficient use of space and wax. Cells are also slightly tilted towards the open end to prevent honey dripping out until capped. It's the capping that indicates to a beekeeper that the honey can be harvested.

Capped honey can keep almost indefinitely. Perfectly edible honeycomb was found in the tombs of the Pharaohs that were over 3,000 years old. How's that for a 'Best Before Date'?



## The Oldest Fossil Flower

The recent loss of artefacts from the British Museum suggests that periodically re-visiting what lies ‘hidden’ in museum collections might be wise. This fragment of amber is one such.

The largest fossilized flower (1.1" across) ever found in amber, it was ‘re-discovered’ at a German Institute 150 years after it was first studied.

The fossil's long life began about 36 million years ago when a blob of sticky resin oozed out of a fir tree near the Baltic Sea in what is now Russia and coated a five-petal flower that, over time, solidified into amber.

After polishing the piece with toothpaste and a damp leather cloth, it was studied under a scanning electron microscope. Excitement increased when it was realised that in addition to preserving the flower's petals, its stamens were at the perfect point of just releasing their pollen. Scientists have determined that the tiny pollen grains are similar to a genus of small trees and shrubs of the ‘sweatleaf’ family whose present-day members live in humid, high-altitude forests in Asia. “Our new findings allow us to understand the climate of the past... and help us gain deeper insights into the forests of Earth's history.” Who would have thought something so small would have so much to say.



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## Crows are Extraordinary

Carrion crows have arrived in Russell Square, not just a pair, but a ‘murder’ of them – as a flock is called, possibly after an old folk tale that crows



will gather and decide the capital fate of another crow. The crow family, which includes the raven, has a remarkable intelligence comparable to that of a Chimpanzee. They easily trick competitors out of their food (one crow distracts and the other steals), will console a friend who has lost a fight, solve problems and are known to sunbathe for a dose of Vitamin D.

It is thought that this group have outgrown their numbers in neighbouring squares. Not unlike humans, on reaching adolescence they leave home in gangs to find new territory where their size and cunning dictates having first pick.

They are brilliant mimics of sounds from a wolf growl to the ‘eek-eek’ of a water pump long years after it has ceased to be in use. They also have a sense of fun. A householder tells of “a crow on a snowy roof

using a yogurt pot lid as a type of toboggan going from the apex to the gutter and flying off, picking up the lid and repeating the performance.”



## The Dulwich Boys

The brick building at the north-west corner of Russell Square houses a Gallery showing a changing programme of exhibitions from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. It is part of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the building it replaces played host to special language courses in World War II. When war with Japan first broke out at the end of 1941, Britain had been woefully unprepared, not least because almost no-one in Britain could speak Japanese. The only place that taught the language was SOAS, so they devised an 18-month course for bright sixth-formers with a flair for languages. They were called the



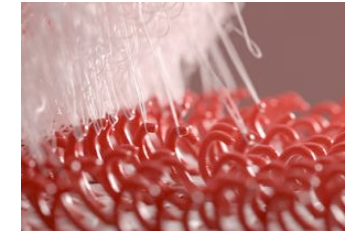
‘Dulwich Boys’ after their school, Dulwich College, and many of them went on to be key players in the post-war relationship between Britain and Japan. [Left, the ‘Boys’ on the SOAS steps.]

The SOAS centenary celebrations in 2016 were launched with an event featuring the ‘Dulwich Boys’, such was the influence on the development of Japanese studies at the school.

[From *Bloomsbury: Fields to Fountains* by Ricci de Freitas.]

## An Invention Inspired by Nature

A Swiss engineer, Georges de Mestral, went for a walk in the woods and returned home to find his woollen socks and his dog’s fur were full of sticky burrs. Wondering if this natural grip could be turned into something useful he looked at them under a microscope and saw their secret was hook-like spikes [see right] that could mesh with the looped fibres in clothes. (A great way to spread their seeds – just hitch a ride.) After nearly 8 years of research to make a synthetic burr, and in spite of being laughed at for a nonsensical idea, de Mestral successfully reproduced the



‘cling’ factor with two strips of fabric, one with thousands of tiny hooks, the other with thousands of tiny loops. He

named his invention Velcro.

Velcro has become a billion-dollar business with its fastening method so famous that, like Kleenex, Hoover, and Band-Aid, its name is mis-used by everyone for all similar products. Found in almost every conceivable application where a temporary bond is required including space shuttles, it even helped hold the first artificial heart together.



Right: de Mestral and his dog.