Notes from ‘Mask Wood’
October 2026

‘Notes’ now believes it was a mistake to end last month’s observations with Ted Hughes’s dreary line from his poem, ‘November’. Instead, the choice should have been the same poet’s ‘October Dawn’. It balances precariously on the slope between Autumn and Winter, but it opens with an explosion of warm colour – ‘October is marigold, and yet/A glass half full of wine left out/To the dark heaven all night, by dawn/Has dreamed a premonition/Of ice across its eye as if /The ice had begun its heave”.

But we have to acknowledge that Autumn is a time of change and decline. Asby Tree Group (ATG) have completed their seasonal cut of a reduced target of one third of the area of open sward, to ensure that sufficient species-rich grassland is maintained for next year’s wildflowers. Visitors will see that one or two small piles of cut grass have been left in the wood. Larger piles will be taken off site for composting, as soon as possible. Attentive readers will recall that ATG has switched to a three-year rotation of cutting, in order to reduce disturbance to overwintering butterfly larvae and pupae. (See the end of this article for a photograph of the grass-cutting team at work)

Apples, Hawthorn berries and a scattering of Holly berries have been joined by clusters of the waxy berries of a single Guelder Rose (*Viburnum opulus*). Here in ‘Mask Wood’, in these clusters of berries, there is a faint echo of distant Ukraine’s resistance, for this is a plant with a symbolic position at the heart of that nation’s current struggle, carried aloft by a statue of the mythological ‘Mother of Ukraine’, in the centre of Kyiv.

Dozens of small apples, from what were heavily laden trees on the southern boundary of the wood, now cover the ground beneath those trees – another source of food for foraging birds and mammals. ‘Notes’ samples one of the apples still on the tree. It is surprisingly palatable, and therefore almost certainly not a true Crab (*Malus sylvestris*). More likely that this is a descendant of a domestic species which has made its way here, or a descendant of one of those species mentioned in October’s ‘Notes’, where we used the words of Dorothy Hinchcliffe of Murton, to describe the planting of apple trees in 18th and 19th century ‘Enclosure Hedges’ in Cumbria.

Fungal growths in wood and meadow are common features of the Autumn landscape. On a small, decaying heap of last year’s grass cuttings, a dull purple fungus grows. Identifying mushrooms and toadstools is not confident territory for ‘Notes’, and there is uncertainty if this is Lilac Fibrecap (*Inocybe geophylla var. lilacina*) or Amethyst Deceiver (*Laccaria amethystina*) – both are found in Cumbria. On a foraging expedition, definite identification would be essential. Amethyst Deceiver (despite its sinister-sounding name) is edible; Lilac Fibrecap is poisonous. Nearby, about two metres up the trunk of a rather stunted English Oak (*Quercus robur*) in the north-east corner of ‘Mask Wood’, is an intriguing growth of a bracket-type fungus, occupying a damaged area of the tree. It could be a much sought after

edible fungus, Chicken of the Woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*) but the dull, tawny colour of its layers of growth are far from the bright yellow of this species (the clue is in its scientific name!) when it is in its prime. That tawny colour is perhaps closer to that of another edible species, Hen of the Woods (*Grifola frondosa*), but the textbooks seem pretty clear that this species is ***always*** to be found at the ***base*** of an oak, and not higher up, on the trunk. Perhaps those with a better grasp of mycology than 'Notes' could take a look and give their opinion?

Close to the fungus-bearing English Oak, there is a very clear depression in the grass, the stems are bent and flattened. It measures roughly 0.75m by 0.5m – large enough to be the resting or sleeping place of a Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*). It's also near the wood's boundary with a field, which is one of the Roe's preferred locations for such a place. Not that Roe Deer (for most of the time) do a lot of sleeping – at least, not as we would recognise it – eyes closing for no more than five minutes at a time, ears constantly twitching in search of sounds of potential threat.

There are at least two Robins (*Erithacus rubecula*) present on one of 'Notes' visits and both are in the species' more plaintive Autumn song. Difficult to be certain, with only limited observations, if these are cock or hen birds, for a number of hen Robins sing, and both cocks and hens maintain separate territories at this time of year. Close to the eastern path, a small mixed finch group, Goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*) and Linnets (*Acanthis cannabina*), feed on and around the seed heads of thistles. The more agile Goldfinches cling to the stems of the plants while the Linnets feed on the ground. Provision of this autumn food source is ***another*** reason for ATG to adopt a more restrained approach to cutting the sward. By the western path, Blackbird (*Turdus merula)* and Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos)* feed on Hawthorn berries. Their presence prompts 'Notes' to anticipate the arrival of the so-called 'winter thrushes', Redwing and Fieldfare, together with the hope that observations of them will feature in next month's edition.

Keith Cooper, October 2026



Grass cutting in Mask Wood