

Hitchin's last red squirrel?

Bob Press, our wonderful Natural History volunteer, has discovered that not only do we have one of Hitchin's last red squirrels hidden away in the store at Burymead, but also that it has an interesting story. Around 1910 an elderly lady, Miss Hailey rescued it from a group of youths who were tormenting it in Hitchin churchyard. Miss Hailey lived at the Biggin almshouses nearby, and fed the squirrel, which became semi-tame and apparently continued to live around the Biggin until the day she found it dead in the snow - probably in the winter following its rescue. It was stuffed and mounted and later donated to the museum.

Reds are our only native squirrels. Nowadays, they are confined mainly to Scotland and small areas of Wales and East Anglia, having been replaced everywhere else by the more aggressive grey squirrel, first introduced into Britain from N. America in 1890 at Woburn and later at Tring. By 1910 greys had colonised Hitchin, so our little fellow may have been one of the last reds living in the town itself. Reds did cling on in rural parts of North Herts but the last recorded sightings were of a pair at Highdown Woods (three miles from Hitchin) in 1943, and individuals at Knebworth Park and Preston Hill, both in 1944. Of course we also have the famous Letchworth black squirrels, now spreading around the rest of North Herts, (see [The Black Squirrel Project](#)) and a new fourth type, [the brunette squirrel](#).

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Bob Press and the Hitchin red quirrel

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