

COMMON GROUND

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 4, February 1993

CONTRACT WORK REAPS BENEFITS

Following the adoption of the Management Plan and the appointment of a full time warden, the next most important decision that the Conservators took in 1992 was to move from the system of direct labour to contract work.

There are three areas for contract work: litter clearance; grass cutting; tree and undergrowth cutting.

Litter: A contract has been awarded to a new firm, A&A Amalgamated, which is run by one of the former work force and employs another.

Paths will be picked of litter on six days a week in the summer months, and bins cleared and litter picked in seven key areas on a daily basis. These areas include Toad Rock, the three cricket grounds, and Brighton Lake.

Grass Cutting: This contract has not yet been negotiated, but it is hoped that a contract will be let to the Borough Council's Highway Dept. as they are already responsible for maintaining the verges round the Commons, and so savings can be obtained through co-operation.

Clearance and Tree Surgery: This area of work is not suitable for a formal long term contract, but there are a number of competing contractors who have worked to a high standard on the Commons, and are keen to tender for the work on an individual job by job basis.

All in all, turning over to contract work is estimated to result in significant savings, thus enabling the Conservators' resources to go further in '93 and beyond.

AGM

Make a diary note NOW.

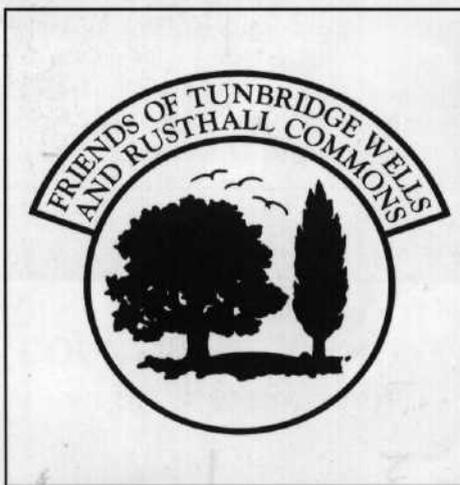
The AGM will be held on

Wednesday 17th February at 8 pm

Venue: Town Hall, Tunbridge Wells.

In addition to formal matters the Warden, Mr Steve Budden, will give a talk on his first eight months, and plans for the future.

Friends, and prospective Friends all welcome.



Hollamby's Haul

Committee member and Assistant Curator to the Tunbridge Wells Museum, Dr Ian Beavis, was at hand to witness the dredging of Fir Tree Pond last November when Terry Hollamby of Heritage Ponds unearthed (unwatered?) more than 3,000 discarded old bottles.

The finds included a number of local brands including those of W A Waters of Rusthall, and C E Ansell of Tunbridge Wells. Some also included old 'cods' - bottles with a marble in the top - perhaps an earlier version of today's high fashion lagers Grolsch and Sol!

Mr Hollamby's work was the final stage in the gradual restoration project which has included work from The Friends, Andrew Scheiner, Skinners School boys, and others.



Terry Hollamby: Expert Dredger

The conclusion of the project is probably the first tangible 'addition' to the Commons since the formation of the Friends, and is well worth a visit as a precursor to its evolution in the months and years to come.

Chairman's Letter

Since last October's Newsletter I think members will have noticed the significant improvements that are now going on all over the Commons under the leadership of the new Warden, Steve Budden.

Particular events and developments are referred to on this and other pages of the Newsletter, but special mention must be made of the Conservators' decision to change over from the direct labour system to contract work; to the planting of 40 Lime trees to commemorate The Queen's 40th accession to the throne, and to recreate the original third line of Victoria Grove.

Clearance and replanting where necessary of the Cherry trees beside 'Donkey Walk' is a visible recent improvement to the view of the Common from London Road.

Extensive further clearance has also been progressed at Happy Valley, enabling more of the vista to be enjoyed. This is also the case in the vicinity of Mt Edgcombe Rocks which is now becoming more recognisable as the site of the 'now and then' perspective in the first issue of Common Ground shows.

Oak saplings and other unwanted species have been removed from the Heather patch just above Victoria Grove, and in Rusthall sycamore seedlings have been removed from many of the Toad Rocks.

Equally satisfying, and a real addition to the Commons, is the restoration of Fir Tree Pond. It has now been professionally dredged, and the results should be appreciated in the Spring (see Ian Beavis's article on page 2).

HIGHWAYS: A particularly useful and informative meeting was held last October with the Borough Council's Highway Dept. We had feared that Appendix 9 - the Highways Input to the Management Plan - might result in unwelcome developments of the Commons.

Continued...

But we were much reassured. In particular we expressed the Friends' opposition to any idea of a 'Pay and Display' scheme for Fir Tree Road car park (which, of course, has at last been resurfaced). On the other hand we kept an open mind on the possibility of extending the Fairground car park in return for parking restrictions in Major York's Road, Castle Road, and Mt Edgcumbe Road.

This is something - together with the question of how far lighting on the Commons should be improved - that Friends might like to discuss at the AGM on February 17th.

SEATS: The seat repair programme - on which much progress was made last year - has unfortunately come to a temporary halt for lack of funds. However a good provision has been made in the Conservators' '93/94 Budget and hopefully an early restart can be made.

Finally I make no apology for raising the matter of membership and subscriptions. Obviously the more members we have the greater our influence is likely to be and the more money we can provide to help with 'extras' the better will be the result for the Commons.

In our first year (1991 -2) people obviously joined at different times. We then made our subscription year from 1st September '92 and many people though they had joined half way through the previous year have kindly subscribed again from 1st September. But not all.

The Committee would be most grateful if those who have not yet renewed their membership could do so - preferably by Bankers Order and with a Covenant, copies of which may be obtained from the Treasurer - and bring in more Friends!

WPS. Jan '93

Briefly...

Railings

The old wooden railings along Mt. Ephraim had been in a poor state for years and were far from able to protect those who might have over indulged at the Beau Nash.

After pressure from the Friends finances were made available by the Conservators. Mr Sissons, who has done such a splendid job on the seats, was given the contract to replace them, which he has now done in piping.

THE COMMON PONDS - A HISTORY

By Dr. Ian Beavis

The newly restored Fir Tree Pond is one of the three survivors out of a total of seven ponds which existed on Tunbridge Wells Common in Victorian times. The other two which remain are the well known Brighton lake and the more obscure 'Bracken Pond' on the western boundary. The only one of these ponds whose history is documented is Brighton Lake, excavated in 1858 to provide work for the town's unemployed. It is not clear whether the rest were all formed

naturally, or whether some were deliberately dug to provide watering places for the sheep and cattle which grazed the Common.

One of the former ponds, below Gibraltar cottage, vanished quite early (between 1855 and 1870), but the Ordnance Survey map of 1873 still shows ponds below Mount Edgcumbe Rocks, beside Castle Road just north of Romanoff Lodge, and on the Common's northern edge by Bishops Down Road. These three had ceased to exist by 1910, leaving the three that can be seen today.



Apart from Brighton Lake, Fir Tree Pond was the only one significant enough to have acquired its own name. It was named after two 'scotch firs' (Scots pines in today's terminology) with a bench around them which went by the name of 'Darby and Joan' and stood on top of the slope behind the pond, towards the Higher Cricket Ground. The pond was evidently a well known beauty spot, since it appears in paintings by Charles Tattershall Dodd and other local artists, in photographs in Victorian guide books, and on a number of Edwardian

Dredged and returning to life. Fir Tree Pond, November 1992

Continued

Bailey Retires

Surveyor to the Conservators, Bill Bailey, will be retiring on April 1st. Mr Bailey has contributed to the management of the Commons over many years, including the period of the Hurricane which left the Commons looking very sad indeed for a number of years, and his knowledge of how the various parties contributed to the working of the Commons was used to advantage.

We hope the formation of the Friends and the appointment of the Warden have given Mr Bailey good grounds for believing the interests of the Commons will continue to be furthered.

Letter

Dear Sir, Would you be kind enough to convey to those directly responsible my very warm thanks for the renewal of seats in Rusthall?

I and my other dog walking friends are getting on in years and are delighted to be able to have a little rest in the seats in the Happy Valley, with the view to the Beacon, and on 'The Bumps', and also the seat on the Langton Road at the entrance to 'The Bumps'.

The Friends are doing a grand job and I am happy to be a supporter. I have met the Warden and am favourably impressed. If only we could overcome the problems of vandalism, and litter louts! Miss R Neve.



Fir Tree Pond, March 1990

postcards. In more recent times, however, tree saplings and undergrowth encroached upon it, and it became forgotten. By 1960 it had largely silted up and had become reduced to a boggy hollow.

Fir Tree Pond with its surrounding area has now been restored to its state at the turn of the century. It will provide an attractive feature on the landscape of the modern Common, and it will also provide a valuable habitat for wildlife. There are, for example, eight species of dragonfly currently occurring on the Common, all dependent in modern times on Brighton Lake as the one remaining piece of open water. Since the adults wander some distance from water, they should be able to colonise the newly opened pond as an alternative breeding site.

Membership

As the Chairman stresses in his Letter, membership is crucial to our well being, both in terms of our influence, and our ability to enhance the Commons (see above, and to the right).

If you are reading this without having renewed your subscription please continue to enjoy the articles, and immediately on completion write to the Treasurer, at 68 London Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN1 1DT enclosing your payment. (£5 per individual, £10 per family - these exclude interest payments in delayed subs and conscience money! Donations also, of course, welcome).

We are grateful once again to have received Corporate Memberships from the Spa Hotel, Mazda Cars Ltd., Wolfit of Monson Road, Private Patients Plan, the Periquito Hotel, Hammonds estate agents, and Thomson Snell and Passmore.

VICTORIA'S COUNTENANCE SHONE - on the second attempt!

It was a matter of second time lucky for the commemorative planting of limes in the Royal Victoria Grove, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of The Queen's accession to the throne. The combination of Her Majesty's 40th anniversary, and the need to replace a number of the trees in the Grove as well as restoring the entire third row of limes was seen as an excellent opportunity to accomplish a necessary and worthy task.

Through a feature in the Courier, which Steve Budden arranged, a call for contributions was launched. Very quickly funds flowed in from local businesses, the Conservators, the Council, The Friends, and The Courier. The target was helped by a substantial donation from Coblands.

Attendance by the public was sadly sparse, and outnumbered by the workers still engaged in completing the planting.

The Lady of the Manor, assisted by the Mayor, jointly performed the ritual planting of the first tree. In a short speech Mr Girling traced the history of The Grove and paid tribute to those organisations, including The Friends, working for the preservation and improvement of the Commons.

A beautiful straight line of young limes now stands parallel to its old companions in silent witness to this well conceived initiative. One feels that the shades of Queen Victoria, if not amused, must at least be well pleased.

PPP are generously printing Common Ground for us, and your committee is most grateful to the Spa Hotel for providing a venue for its monthly meetings.

My First Six Months

It is now six months since I took up the post of Warden for the Commons. Much of that time has been taken up in familiarising myself with the Commons and some of the problems they suffer from.

Much work has been accomplished, however, including the desilting of Fir Tree Pond, replanting the third row of Victoria Grove and initial clearance of the views at Happy Valley and Mt. Edgumbe.

1993 will see the start of a new regime on the Commons with the work going out to contract instead of direct labour. It is hoped that this will not only enable the budget to stretch further but will also give more flexibility. Changes will be made to the mowing regime practiced up to now. Rather than the standard cyclic approach there will be an attempt to manage suitable sites as meadow areas, leaving the grass to grow and wild flowers to bloom before they are cut. A large part of the budget will be devoted to improving the facilities on the Commons. The seat restoration programme will continue and the litter bins will be replaced by the closed top type in the hope that this will ease the problem of them being raided by magpies and foxes.

Path widening and maintenance will continue and at least one more pond will be restored.

Further clearance is planned at Happy Valley concentrating on the lower slopes and rock faces and also at Mt. Edgumbe Rocks.

Volunteers have been a valuable source of labour in the winter of 1992/93 and I hope that this will increase in the forthcoming year. By the start of the autumn I hope to be able to recruit a work force to perform monthly tasks in the Commons. A list of dates and tasks will appear in this newsletter later in the year.

Steve Budden, Warden

Diary

AGM

February 17th, Town Hall, Tunbridge Wells, 8pm.

Summer Exhibition

Town Hall, July 17th-31st. A rare opportunity to see in an historical context pictorial, written and other specimens relating to the Commons.

Donkey Walk

Towards the end of last year a team of volunteers from West Kent College under the supervision of Steve Budden together with the Conservators' work force cleared all around the cherry trees beside 'Donkey Walk'.

Several new trees were planted to take the place of ones that had died - the gift of Messrs Coblands.

Anyone who has recently walked along this road will note the great improvement. It should be even more noticeable when blossom time comes.

At the same time more clearance was done above and below Mt. Edgcombe Rocks. More remains to be done but the vista from Mt. Ephraim across the valley is beginning to be seen again.



A previously hidden vista. Drawn by Mr T. May

OF CELANDINES AND GLADES

Readers may recollect our oldest and most distant member lives in Malta. In this first part of her fond memories of the Commons Mary Cookson-Jones, arrives in Tunbridge Well, aged around 6, shortly after the death of Queen Victoria.

I was born towards the end of the Victorian age in that very Victorian part of England, the Isle of Wight, within sight and sound of the sea; so it was a great change a few years after the old Queen's death to be torn away from the huge white cliffs, the esplanade and the beloved pier. I was told about Tunbridge Wells, which was to be my new home, but I had no other place with which to compare it, and so my imagination could not build my future playground. I fastened on to a few facts, and looked forward with some growing interest to actually seeing the Common and above all the Brighton Lake where there was water for paddling and sailing my small boat.

BRIGHTON LAKE

Very soon after we had 'settled in', I was demanding to be taken to see this longed for stretch of water. We lived in Madeira Park and one morning our kind housemaid, knowing I must greatly miss my nurse, took me through the fascinating Cumberland walk and unfamiliar Pantiles until, lying passive at the foot of a wide-spread grassy countryside, was the Brighton Lake! But how small! How colourless, and how still! Where was the sandy shore to build sand castles? I do not remember voicing my

disappointment I think I realised that it would be useless.

We sailed the boat on a bit of string for short distances, but I do not recollect ever visiting the lake very often. I turned my attention elsewhere - to wide acres of Common, full of bushes and trees and grass and flowers.

I was an only child, and my father was my constant companion, taking me for walks on the downs, pointing out the different flowers and giving them their names. With some shame, I remember correcting my nurse who spoke of 'the pretty buttercups.' 'Those aren't buttercups, nanny. They're celandine,' I gently told her.

A SECRET GROVE

The Common sloped upwards above the Lake until the bare, open spaces became grown over - naturally and pleasantly, with trees and bushes, hazel, gorse and bramble. On one Spring, Sunday morning my father and I found a treasure to take the place of the seashore. It was a small innocent and unexplored grove, lying hidden from any paths or open spaces. The copse was protected by the green, budding branches and tall climbing plants, hiding it from view or being trodden over by careless intruders. The sunshine spread a gentle light, the breeze equally gently gave welcome to the finders of this magical glade - no-one knew of it but ourselves, and we went home and told my

mother all about it. I had found a home and to this day I have never forgotten it.

But alas, it was a magical place, and we never succeeded in finding it again, so remote behind the Lake, and 'off the beaten track.'

The Common stretched all along the back of the Pantiles as far as the Church of King Charles the Martyr, and further, but a central spot for any kind of display was offered by the open slopes and the magnificent trees, and here I had my first introduction to military life, for one morning a detachment of, I suppose yeomanry, was to gather there for inspection, and everybody flocked out to see them. I was mystified, I think, for all I was aware of was a formal square of khaki clad men obviously on their best behaviour! This was probably the reason why my father went off and bought me a detachment of toy soldiers and a small cannon. However, they were not my favourite toys: I preferred the little paper windmills our housemaid cut out for me and on a breezy day took me to the same area, set them on a rising path, where the wind blew them down hill and I excitedly chased them until they blew into a ditch. It was an improvement on the slow progress round the Brighton Lake.

In forthcoming issues Mary Cookson-Jones shares her experience of fairs, Wellington Rock, and school!