

COMMON GROUND

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 5. Summer 1993

CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

We have now been going nearly two years and our new recruitment leaflet * gives a summary of some of the things we have achieved - or helped to achieve. After the (sometimes) frenzied activity of the last 2 years we have now entered somewhat calmer water. But, as I'm sure all members will agree, there is a vast amount of work still to be done.

Views Sought

As Steve Budden says in his Report on this page the new grass-cutting regime has had its teething troubles and it is to be hoped can be improved. It would be interesting to hear from members what they think of the new regime. This would help the Committee in any representations they think they should make to the Conservators.

Much more work also still needs to be done to repair the ravages of the October 1987 hurricane and later storms. Fallen trees, damaged trees, no-go areas still need to be cleared whilst retaining areas for wildlife as recommended by the Management Plan. Hopefully the Conservators will get funds from the Council to enable them to do this work.

Seats

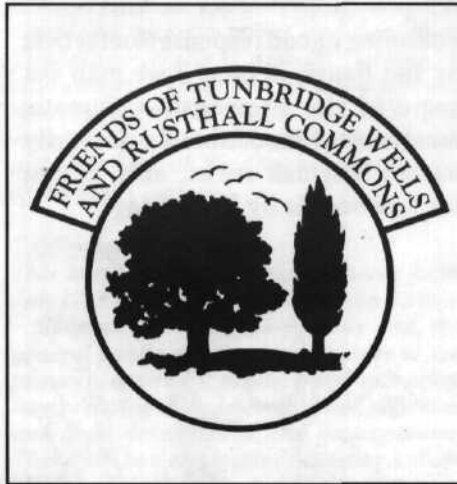
Steve Budden's Report mentions this subject. We must all be most grateful to the Page family for their great generosity over new seats and, as will be seen, your Committee has decided to donate two more, 1 for Tunbridge Wells, 1 for Rusthall. And the repair or removal of damaged seats will continue. We have also agreed to fund two of the new litter bins - which are remarkably expensive - some £440 each including siting - but made of steel and covered to prevent magpies etc redistributing the refuse.

Our recent recruitment campaign has so far resulted in 15 new members and our total membership now stands at 143 Family Members (2 or more), 77 individual members and 7 Corporate Members. NPI have just joined as a Corporate Member and we are very pleased to welcome them.

I hope members are satisfied with our progress. If not, or if they have any points will they please write to me.

W.P.S.

* Supplies of these are available from Gerry Brown, on T.W. 534635, for passing on to friends and neighbours.



FRIENDS PITCH FOR MEMBERS

Almost the best thing that weekend was the weather - brilliant sunshine. If you are going to have to give up a couple of hours of your weekend to proselytise the Friends' message then good weather does make it all seem worthwhile.

Some bright spark at the end of the Committee table a couple of months ago thought that it would be a good idea to set up shop on the Common one weekend to try to raise the profile of the Friends and maybe rope in a few new members - but unfortunately he didn't want to organise it. "Somebody else" was called for but sadly he too was unaccountably unavailable so it fell to myself, Marion May, Mark Roelosen and Conrad Payne to sort it out, which we did one evening over a convivial glass.

Marion with Ian Beavis produced splendid maps of each Common with notes on buildings and other features which we hope to expand one day into a more formal guide with walks. These were kindly reproduced by the Council together with a broadsheet listing the Friends' activities since our formation and a membership application form which were handed out over the weekend.

WARDEN'S REPORT

At the time of writing my main pre-occupation is grass cutting. Experiments started this year in altering the cutting regime on many areas of the Common. The intention is to encourage the spread of wild flowers by allowing them to seed before the grass is first cut. It has had mixed success. Some areas have produced encouraging results, such as at St Paul's Church in Rusthall and the area between Wellington Rocks and Mount Ephraim. Others have yielded the less welcome crop, mostly of cow parsley and nettles. Most of these areas will now be cut and raked off although one or two areas will receive only one cut and rake at the end of the Summer. All this is providing valuable information to enable me to amend the plans for the future. As the regimes of cutting and raking starve out the more aggressive species the situation become easier to control as time goes on. I hope over the next few autumns to add wild flower seed to some of these areas.

The new ponds are slowly settling down. The pond at Rusthall Marl Pit has been fenced off for the Summer as it was proving too popular a spot and vegetation was notable to recolonize. This seems to have a very good newt population and if they have bred successfully this year the future looks secure. The two ponds on Tunbridge Wells Common are also coming alive. The Fir Tree Pond is becoming choked with floating grass and some control measures will be taken but it is full of tadpoles and is enjoying the attentions of dragonflies and damselflies. Bracken Cottage Pond is also settling well and has a population of tadpoles although not as many as Fir Tree.

June saw bracken control get underway on newly cleared areas and marked the start of mowing back the path edges. As far as possible care will be taken to cut the bracken and bramble on those areas and leave the wild flowers.

A pattern has now been manufactured to allow us to replace the Victorian "Hawthorn" seat ends and these will slowly start to replace the concrete ended seats. The first ten "Hawthorns" are being sited now. These are being kindly donated by the Page Family and will be at the "South of France" (facing Bishops Down Road) in memory of Mrs Edwina "Teddy" Page who

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Confined on page 2

★ COMMONS FEATURE IN MUSEUM ★ EXHIBITION

JULY 17th - AUGUST 4th TUNBRIDGE WELLS MUSEUM - See page 3

WARDEN'S REPORT (continued from page 1)

for nearly 60 years enjoyed this place. Obviously the cost of the Hawthorns means that the replacement programme will have to last several years so in the meantime a repair programme for the existing benches will be carried out.

Finally on a sad note, several of the newly planted lime trees at Victoria Grove have died. These trees came into leaf and then mysteriously died. Investigations are being carried out into why before they are replaced in the Autumn.

LITTER PICKING

Another litter pick was held on both Commons on Saturday morning, April 24th. 10 members helped at Tunbridge Wells and the same at Rusthall. The usual haul of paper, cans, bottles and a variety of other rubbish was collected, bagged and taken away by the Council's Cleaner Borough Support Unit.

Some members have queried why they should be called upon to do litter picks when a substantial sum (£12,000) has been put in the Conservators' budget for 1993/4 to cover the new litter contract. The Warden's answer is that he is still most grateful to have the help of the Friends. The contractors cannot be expected to get into all the undergrowth and our working parties have been particularly good in getting at more difficult places and steadily helping to improve the look of the Commons. So litter picks will continue!

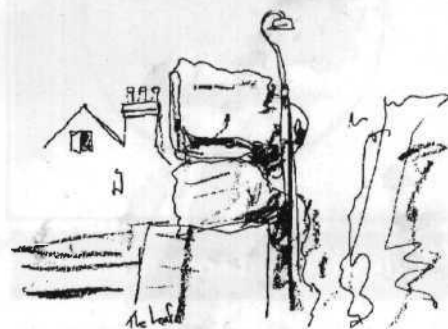
AGM REPORT

It seems a long time ago now but perhaps members who were not present would appreciate a short report.

The meeting was well attended - about 80 members. After reports by the Chairman and the Treasurer, the Committee was re-elected. The meeting then heard a very full and good report by the Warden, Mr Steve Budden, which was well illustrated by slides. After questions had been answered discussion took place on issues which had previously been notified - (a) possible extension of the Fairground car park in return for parking restrictions on Commons roads and (b) the question of more lighting. The general feeling of the meeting was that if cars could be removed from Commons roads, it would be of considerable environmental benefit. The Warden felt it was not necessary to extend the Fairground car park. As regards lighting, the meeting was divided. It was agreed to await any proposals which might come from the Conservators.

REVEALED - LOCAL RUSTHALL ROCK

Following a good response to an article by Ian Beavis in issue 3 we map out some of the previously enigmatic locations of undoubtedly logically named Rusthall rocks, ably drawn for our benefit by Tony May.

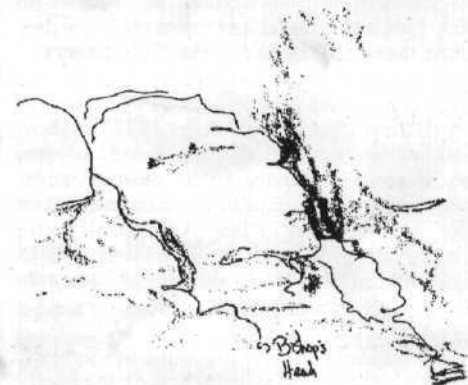


The Loaf

Before the development of Tunbridge Wells town, most visitors to the Wells lodged at the nearby hamlets of Southborough and Rusthall. This explains the development at Rusthall of facilities like the Cold Bath and Assembly Room whose sites now seem very remote. Substantial building began at Tunbridge Wells in the closing decades of the 17th century, and by 1750 Rusthall had fallen into obscurity. It seems to have

been rediscovered as a place of interest to visitors around 1810, when we find the first references to what we now call the Toad Rock, although it is initially described by phrases like 'singular rock on Rusthall Common'. The site soon became a necessary part of the tourist itinerary, and by 1820 the name Toad Rock had become established. The most conspicuous of the surrounding rocks soon acquired names as well, the earliest being the Lion, the Loaf and the Parsons Nose.

The heyday of Denny Bottom as a visitor

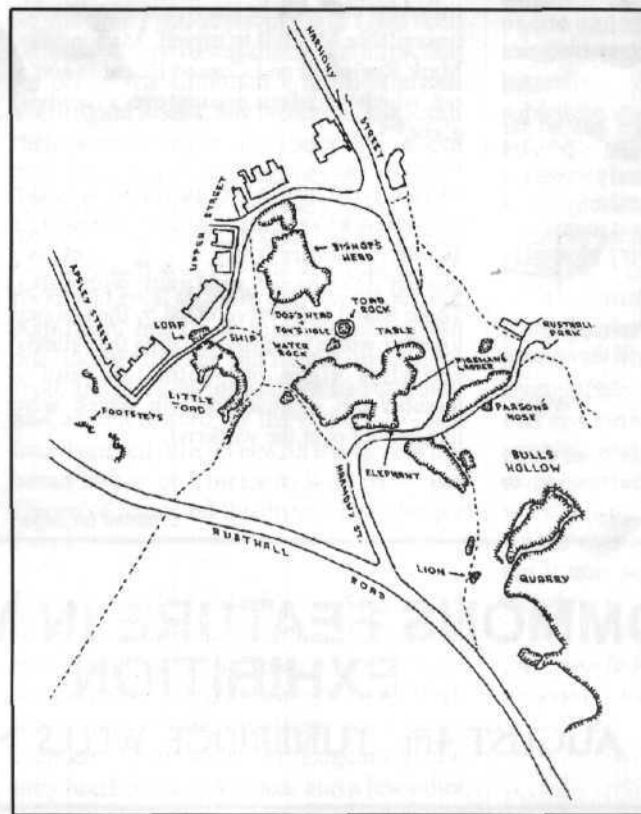


Bishop's Head

attraction was undoubtedly in late Victorian and Edwardian times. E. V. Lucas wrote in 1904 that "the famous Toad Rock is to

Tunbridge Wells what the leaning tower is to Pisa" and that it "has almost as many pilgrims as Stonehenge". Martin and Tow's guidebook

'Tunbridge Wells of Today' (c.1895) has a delightful description of a visit to the Road. "When as visitor you explore this locality", they write, "you will soon discover that you are an object of mercenary interest, and almost before you are aware of it you are under the guidance of a self-appointed cicerone, and from his lips will learn that well nigh every rock has its name derived from a fancied resemblance to the things mentioned. A very strong fancy is required in most cases. But



TIONS OF

DIARY DATES

Another Walk

Dr Ian Beavis has kindly agreed to lead another walk round both Commons. It will take place on Saturday September 4th - meet outside Thackeray's Restaurant, 85 London Road, at 10.30am. Ian will then lead his party round the historic points and houses of Tunbridge Wells Common, giving a commentary. There will be a lunch break between 12.30 and 2.00pm and those who wish to continue (or new joiners) should meet at 2.00pm beneath Toad Rock to start the tour of Rusthall Common.

Exhibition

This is taking place in the Museum from July 17 - August 3 (Monday-Saturday 9.30am - 5.00pm). It will give Friends and the general public a unique opportunity to see pictures, drawings, prints, maps and other items relating to the history of the Commons and their development and management. There will be a catalogue containing a short history of the Commons and the Manor of Rusthall and maps with notes on the historic features.

We hope that by the time this issue of Common Ground reaches you, you will already have visited the Exhibition or there will still be time to do so.

The Conservators Finances

In an earlier edition of Common Ground (March 1992) we published some information about the Conservators' finances. The expenditure for 92/93 was then expected to be £86050 (as compared with an expenditure for 91/92 of £64038). This was funded by the precept on the Council of £74100 together with taking £11950 from the reserves. In fact the figures came out somewhat differently; The total expenditure was £92,227 but income (including contributions from the Friends, Freehold Tenants, etc.) was higher than budgeted and the call on the reserves became £11,725. The audited accounts will be available for inspection at the Town Hall from 29 July - 12 Aug.

For this current year - 1993/94 - there is, of course, a great change in the accounts in that there is no longer a direct labour force and the change-over has been made to contract labour. The net result is that the total expenditure is estimated at £77,055 with the precept from the Council being £76,700. This means that the reserves will be maintained at approximately £26,500.

In addition the Friends and the Freehold Tenants are both contributing new seats and to the seat repair programme as well as to the new litter bins.

Undoubtedly a lot more money could be spent on the Commons with advantage. Hence the importance - in these hard times of restrictions upon public expenditure - of contributions which can be raised by the Friends and other bodies.

TCM (Town Centre Management)

We are represented on the Steering Group and on the Environment Sub-Group which has made a number of recommendations - notably better access from the Town to the Common, a better kept fringe to the Common all down London Road and, if possible, the removal of parking from Common roads. It is hoped that TCM funds may, in part, be available to supplement those of the Conservators to achieve improvements.

PITCH FOR MEMBERS (Continued)

Came the Saturday morning and I started to erect the tent near the Wellington Rocks. Hardly had I put mallet to peg when a voice growled "I hope you've got permission to do that." "Yes" I said. "What's it all in aid of?" "Publicising the Friends of the Commons" I said.

That did it, he was a "Status Quo" man if ever I met one, though quite how the status quo would be preserved if one was allowed (by him) to do nothing at all I didn't quite gather. I was given to understand that we have completely wasted our time attacking the Japanese Knotweed since you can't tell where it is until it flowers. I have to say that at about seven feet tall without flowers we didn't have too much trouble finding it - but I'm not an "expert". And then there was all that mowing down by the Pantiles, it should never have been done, it destroyed a colony of some extraordinarily rare plant. I said that that was most unfortunate but that the Conservators had commissioned the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation to survey the Commons and had they alerted them then doubtless that area would have been managed in a different way. They can only do their best, I suggested. I was left with the distinct impression that the Conservators had consulted the wrong expert.

Irritating though this was I hope that it draws to your attention that there are those who do not understand what the "Friends" and the Conservators are trying to do and that you will try to inform others of our aims.

Happily, I understand, that was the only negative response we had. We recruited 15 new members and took addresses of many others; we showed the flag, we watched the cricket and we basked in the glorious sunshine. We think we might do it again next year! Many thanks to all who manned the tent and table and recruited new members and handed out our literature.

Peter Hoole

Can readers suggest other 'bright ideas' for recruiting new members?



Little Toad and Ship Rock

if 'you make believe hard enough', you can almost see a resemblance between the rock which you are told is the Pulpit Rock and a pulpit; and the same may apply to the Little Toad, the Elephant, the Fox's Bloodstain, the Lion, and the Pig's Head Rocks, and we believe there are a few score more." It is obvious that there was at this time a great proliferation of names which were not truly traditional but invented for the benefit of tourists. And it is not difficult to imagine the yarns that the guides emerging from the surrounding cottages would have spun around some of the names on Martin and Row's list.



The Elephant

Unfortunately, **no-one** ever thought to create a map of the rocks, and with the decline in visitors since the last War the names were mostly forgotten. **With the help** of two older residents of Denny Bottom, I **have been** able to identify most of the rocks on the above list (the Pulpit, incidentally, is an alternative name for the Parsons Nose) plus a few not mentioned there, but there are a few that remain to be found. And what about the "few score more"? Any further information would be greatly appreciated.

BRACKEN POND

One of the most successful subjects of pond restoration in recent months has been that of the little pond outside Bracken Cottage - on the south side of Major York's Road, not far from Fir Tree Pond.

There is a good supply of flowing water to the pond which is therefore full at all times. It has now been cleared of silt, rubbish, grass, etc leaving a central island for mallards who recently reared a family there but, sadly, have now flown away. However, a little colony of moorhens have now established themselves.



Bracken Pond. June 1993

OPEN SPACE

Letters and views are always welcome. Please write to Common Ground editor, Mark Roelofsen at 1B Montacute Gardens, Tunbridge Wells, TN4 8HG.

THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN, (Circa 1905)

Mary Cookson-Jones, our oldest member, continues her childhood memories of the Commons.

On the Bank Holidays my father would take me to the fair! Lured by the distinctive crude music of the roundabouts we walked till we came in sight of the crowds enjoying the excitement of the swings, the prancing wooden horses, the shots from the guns aimed at winning a "present" for a "best girl" or a favourite grandchild. All around were sellers of paper streamers and balloons and windmills on sticks. The stall we always visited first was "Jo in the Bottle", **and justifyingly** held the attention of all who packed the tent, where a small black figure submerged **in** a bottle of water obeyed every command given him by his master who stood behind the bottle: "go up, Jo," "go down," "Jo, lie down". No means of communication passed between the two, **and yet** Jo did exactly **as** he was told - except one thing - Jo must never be told by his master to turn a summersault. But the mystery **continued** to puzzle audiences when they came to see him year after year.

The Circus

The other excitement on the Common's fairground of **the** same calibre, but presented **with** more sobriety and order, **was** the circus **and** all its paraphernalia, which represented the rare and exciting life of those who promoted it. The Common became an exciting **spot** "**housing**" wild animals whose unusual voices issued from closed wagons, and were only to be seen in the procession which "preceded the actual performance".

"Which route around the Common would give us the best view? Would there be an elephant in it? And a clown or two?" You must remember that this was long before the days of radio and television and once gone by the procession **had** been missed by a latecomer to a vantage point.

Wellington Rocks

By the time I was seven or eight I had been introduced to **what was** the central attraction for all of the Common - the mysterious Wellington Rocks. My father **told** me about their genuine origin, **and** I became aware of "the dark, backward and abysm of time" **when** the **sea** had covered the Common and more land besides; its retreat had left proofs of its capacity for everyone to accept. Little rocks and great rocks, or curious shapes and significant markings, piled attractively on one another, higher and higher, calling for **more and** more daring and practice to climb, and what a reward for the last effort - one found oneself **on** a level **with** the **view** of the broad sweep of Common, flanked by the Queen's Grove and the distant Broadwater Forest.

But between the Queen's Grove and the rocks lay a wide expanse of short tufted grass for just running about, or cricket, for following the footpath ways to gorse-bush hiding-places, and hawthorn trees to be climbed. Here stood Mt. Edgcumbe, the only hotel **on** the Common, and a few other

houses only inhabited by people we never saw, and beyond them the cricket ground, whose railings existed for **us** to "turn turtle" over paralleled by the cricket ground on the Major York's side of this area.

My First Photo

Somewhere near to this area my beloved grandma ("granny" to all my friends) took us one fine Spring morning to try a new toy she had brought me - a large red paper butterfly. You twisted its antennae, or substitute stamens, and launched it in the air, whereupon it came to life and fluttered above our heads, generally coming to earth to be picked up and launched again and again by us all. Who should arrive on the scene but a professional photographer and with granny's permission took our photographs, butterfly and all, as we sat in a row on the pleasant wooden seats so thoughtfully placed about the Common for less energetic or older people. The result **was** dear and good, **but bore** no resemblance to our elaborate coloured specimens, and nor did the price of a few pennies per copy! It was simply reproduced on a "negative" but it was permanent, and I have mine to this day.

The concluding piece will feature in the next issue. Renew membership, or miss out!