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COMMON GROUND

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 6. Winter 1993

CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

STEADY PROGRESS REVERSES PAST NEGLECT

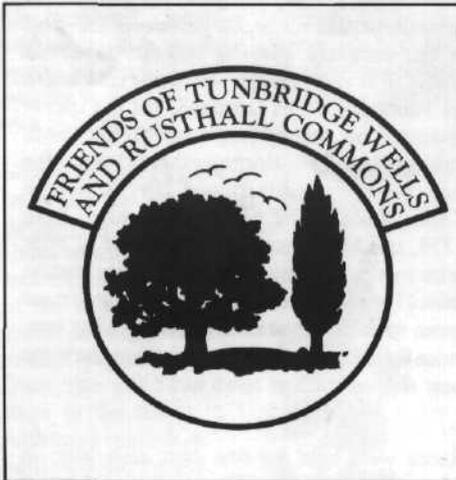
I hope members will agree that the Conservators are now making steady progress in improving the Commons and clearing up the backlog of past neglect. The grass cutting this last summer was, on the whole, satisfactory, though some lessons have been learnt for the letting of next year's contracts. This winter, as Steve Budden's report on this page makes clear, a great deal of clearance and improvement will be done.

I suppose the most noticeable work is that at the bottom of London Road where the clearance has been carried out with the help of joint funding from the Town Centre Management (TCM) project. Some people may think too much has been cleared but I have to say that most people whom I have talked to or who have telephoned in to the Conservators' office, are pleased with the new look of this area which was one that had been particularly devastated by the October '87 hurricane. The view as you come down London Road looking to the right is particularly improved, and what is perhaps the oldest tree on the Common - Queen Anne's Oak - is now clearly seen, ringed by old railings which can hopefully be replaced.

The London Road project is also particularly important as a pathfinder for, hopefully, more joint projects between the Conservators and TCM. We are pressing for a similar improvement job to be done on the Mount Ephraim verge of the Common - between St Helena and Gibraltar - and we are delighted that the TCM Environment Group supports our aim of eventually banning parking on all Commons roads.

Volunteers - Steve Budden has received good support for his 'first Sunday in each winter month' volunteer working party projects, from the High Weald Volunteers and schoolboys and girls working for their Duke of Edinburgh Awards. But I'm afraid the support from the Friends has been poor. Obviously people have many other commitments but if we could achieve a better turnout in December-April that would be good. A reminder about the dates and places appears on page 2.

Seats and Benches - All seats and benches right across the 2 Commons have now been repaired, or if beyond repair, removed. The latest 2 seats donated by the Friends are now in situ - one beside the path that goes up from the Pantiles to the Higher Cricket Ground where it crosses the Racecourse and the other below Toad Rock. Both have nice plaques let into the seat backs saying Presented by the Friends'. Dave Sissons, who does all the seat work, is very kindly presenting another seat in recognition of our work and this will be positioned on the knoll just below St Helena. PPP as well as being a



Corporate Member and printing this newsletter for us are also donating a seat in recognition of their retiring Deputy Chairman and Managing Director, Roy Forman.

Please do not wait till the AGM to make any comments or suggestions about the work your committee is doing on your behalf, feel free to contact me at any time, and have a good Christmas. WPS

SPOOK TOO SOON

The caves beneath St Helena which were used in the war as air raid shelters have long been shut up as a precaution against vandalism. Nevertheless one of our members suggested they might be a suitable venue for a Halloween party.

Steve Budden investigated with the help of the local Fire Brigade and reported that they were not only uninteresting, but also unpleasant. Further, some of our more agile members would have had difficulty getting down there, let alone the elderly and infirm. So the party did not get off the ground (or under it).

Nevertheless a party of some sort, somewhere might be nice - any volunteers? (to Patrick, please), and do any members have any recollection of the caves in use, if so please write to Common Ground's editor (see back page).

AGM - ADVANCE NOTICE

We have fixed the next AGM for Wednesday 16th February 1994, in the Town Hall at 8 p.m. Please make a note in your diary. I hope we will have a good turnout, since Steve Budden will once again give an illustrated talk on current work and plans, and answer any questions you may have. This was greatly appreciated by members last year.

WARDEN'S REPORT

WINTER WORK WELL IN HAND

With the change in the seasons comes a change in emphasis in works on the Commons. Grass cutting has drawn to a close and clearance and woodland work has started for the winter period.

Further work will be carried out at Happy Valley this year. This time it will be at the other end of the slope, near St Paul's Church. Fallen timber, cherry, laurel and holly will be removed to allow in more light, to uncover some of the rock faces and make some of the paths useable again.

The Denny Bottom area will also be receiving some attention with a volunteer work party on 5 December to clear bracken, bramble and saplings from the Toad Rock complex. Rusthall Venture Scouts are hoping to undertake tasks at Bulls Hollow, scrub and fallen trees will be cleared from the base of the rocks and work will be done to encourage the colony of heather and bilberry.

Another volunteer day was held on 7th November to coppice hawthorn and sycamore and cut back bramble and holly and so increase light levels for the colony of coral root bittercress on Rusthall Common.

The meeting points for the December work party is outside the Brahm's Public House at 10 a.m. or simply meet us on site.

On Tunbridge Wells Common, the Community Service Workers will continue to work next to the pond at Bracken Cottage to recover the grassland.

At Brighton Lake work has started to clear some of the scrub and bramble behind and this will continue both with Community Service and with a volunteer work party on 2 January 1994. Fallen trees will start to be removed next to the footpath above the lake running parallel to Eridge Road.

The dead limes at Victoria Grove will be replaced next spring and Mount Edgcumbe Rocks will be receiving more attention. In the same area anti-parking posts will be put in to stop some of the parking problems at the top end of Castle Road.

One major project started in November was the clearance of sycamore, elder and bramble on the London Road boundary of the Common opposite Vale Road Post Office. Major trees will have remedial surgery carried out and the native understorey trees such as rowan, birch and hazel will be left. In the same area the Jubilee Oak, planted on the Lower Cricket Pitch in 1887 will have the storm damage removed and the tree will be re-shaped.

Continued on page 2

WARDEN'S REPORT

(continued)

Five more "Hawthorn" benches have now been installed, two of them kindly presented by the Friends. I very much **hope** that these benches will encourage more organisations and private citizens to make similar donations.

Finally, a reminder about the volunteer work parties this winter. Please come **along**, no experience is necessary, all tools **will** be provided **and** any training **that** is required. **No one** will try and make you work harder and longer than you wish and you will be **surprised** at the end of the day by how much fun you have had.

WINTER WORK PARTIES

Dec. 5th	Clearance of bramble and sycamore - Toad Rock
Jan. 2nd	Brighton Lake - clearance
Feb. 6th	Clearance of sycamore - Bishops Down
Apr. 3rd	Winching scrub oak - Victoria Grove

SB

RUN ITS COURSE

"Horse racing makes another of the varied amusements of this **place**," writes Thomas Burr in the first town guide of 1766, "and, although these races are not so famous as those of Newmarket, **yet** they will generally afford some diversion to those who, for the sake of the sport or the company, may be inclined to attend them." It is not known when racing **first** began on Tunbridge Wells Common, but the course appeared on the earliest map of the town, **published in 1738**. Burr says that in his day the races were principally supported by Sir George Kelley, Lord of the Manor of Rusthall from 1758, and his descendants continued to offer prize money in subsequent years. Race posters from 1796-7 refer to a **'new course'**, which must mean some improvement of the existing one, since the course as seen today follows the same pear shaped track as sown in 1738.

Races were held for two days each year, in August or September. The winning post, stand and enclosure were on the site of the present Higher Cricket Ground. Kidd's guide of about 1830 reports that they "attract a vast assemblage of the fashionables from the adjoining neighbourhood". In 1834 the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victoria attended, watching from their carriage under a specially erected canopy decorated with flowers.

There was, however, another side to the races. Gambling booths and stalls **for the sale** of alcohol sprang **up** all over the Common **at** race time, and there were complaints of drunkenness and riotous behaviour. Following **'disgraceful scenes'** in 1833, new regulations were instituted in time for the Royal visit of the following year. Gambling booths were forbidden and sale of drink restricted to innkeepers licensed by the Race Committee. But the old problems soon reasserted themselves, and the rules were persistently disregarded. **From 1838** we find the Police Committee agreeing each year to waive normal shift arrangements **on** race days, making all their men available for duty, and to employ two temporary assistant constables. In 1845, 185 residents printed a signed document pledging themselves to campaign for the suppression of the races, arguing that they "bring together a number of disorderly characters, and that, although any serious disturbance on the Race Course may be repressed by the vigilance of the Police, they too often **lead** to riot and drunkenness elsewhere." **Even** the vigilance of the police was not beyond question: in 1851, for example, P C Grover was "reported for having **been** the worse for liquor while **on duty on the** Race Course." By 1855 the Tunbridge Wells Races had passed into history, but the course (apart from the section crossing the Cricket Ground) was preserved as a footpath and bridle-way and can still be followed today. **IB**

CORRESPONDENCE

A WONDERFUL WALK from Mrs M Secrett

Please could you thank Ian Beavis, on my behalf, for organising a wonderful walk around both Commons.

It was a great **day**, and Dr. Beavis was a most interesting guide. He introduced us to unexplored walks, where work is being carried out to restore the views of the town, and to encourage the spread of wild flowers by allowing them to seed.

In the afternoon we crossed to Rusthall to study the rocks, and to see how the ponds are being cleared to make room for dragon flies and tadpoles, and finally to Happy Valley to enjoy breathtaking views.

Editor's Note: Ian is **considering** conducting a walk again next year, probably in July, to coincide with a different season.

GETTING THERE from Mr R Stone, Clerk to the Commons Conservators

I should like to thank you very much indeed for the "Freinds" recent donation of £880 towards the campaign for new litter bins on the Commons.

The Conservators very much appreciate the generosity of the Friends and feel that, with **our** joint efforts, the Commons are beginning to be a much better place for the public to enjoy.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK from Mr P J Ancombe

I suspect that many people who enjoy walking around the Race Track **are** not aware of its original use.

Would it not be a good idea to replace the current No Riding notices with ones saying something like 'No Riding on the Race Track between etc' thereby enhancing **peoples'** knowledge of this feature, without additional notices?

Letters continue on page 3

TUNBRIDGE-WELLS RACES, 1797.



On THURSDAY and FRIDAY, the 10th and 11th of AUGUST, will be Run for on the new Course.

FIRST DAY,

The Ladies' Subscription Purse of Six Guineas,

Free for any Horse, Mare, or Gelding, to carry Weight for Age and Inches:—Three Years old, 7lb.—Four Years old, 8lb.—Five Years old, 9lb.—Six Years old, 10lb. and aged Horses, 10lb. 7lb.—the best of Three Two Mile Heats. To Enter the Day before Running, at the ANGEL INN.—5s. 6d. Entrance, or Double at the Post. To start precisely at Three o'Clock.

And on the same Day will be Run for,

A PURSE of FOUR GUINEAS,

By Galloways, not exceeding 13 & 1/4 Hands high—Catch Weight—to start between the other Heats—5s. Entrance, or Double at the Post. The winning Horse to be sold for Thirty Guineas, if demanded within a Quarter of an Hour after the Heats.

On FRIDAY, will be Run for,

The Gentlemen's Subscription Purse of Ten Guineas,

Free for any Horse, Mare, or Gelding, Weight and Conditions as above,—10s. 6d. Entrance, or Double at the Post, Heats. The winning Horse to be sold for Forty Guineas, if demanded within a Quarter of an Hour after the Heats.

On the same Day will be Run for, by Ponies not exceeding 13 Hands high,

A very good Saddle and Bridle, Value Three Pounds.

To start between the Heats for this Purse.—2s. 6d. Entrance. Not less than Three Horses to start for any of the above Prizes.

N. B. On FRIDAY Morning a MAIN of COCKS will be fought, by the Gentlemen of WEST-KENT, against EAST-KENT, for TWO GUINEAS a Battle,—Ten the Main.—To begin fighting at Nine o'Clock in the Morning.

WADDICOMBE, Westgate at Tunbridge Wells, Kent. 1797.

Festive Flora

We are delighted to commence a regular feature on seasonal and rare flora of the Commons, by Mary Page. Illustrations by Mr H.S. Page.

FLOWERS ON THE COMMON

Winter is not the time when we usually think about wild flowers, but we do have a few that bloom all the year round and some of them can be found on the Common. Perhaps the best known is the DAISY *Bellis perennis* which flowers, even under the snow. It has been with us since prehistoric times. The name daisy comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'day's-eye' as the flowers close when evening comes. In the Middle Ages it was known as Bruisewort and used for easing gouts and fevers. In the fourteenth century it became well known as a cure for flesh wounds and was no doubt carried in the pack of many a jousting knight or crusader. Another name was Bairnswort, due to its association with children and daisy-chains. Although such a small and common flower it has been the source of inspiration to the poets from Chaucer to Wordsworth.



DAISY
Bellis perennis
H.S. PAGE

'When Gorse is out of bloom, kissing is out of season' - so runs the old saying because it can be found in flower in any month of the year. GORSE *Ulex europaeus* is a member of the large Peaflower family. Its other names are furze or whin. Traces of gorse have been found as far back as Neolithic times when it was used for firing where timber was scarce, and also as a fodder for cattle. It continued to be used for these two purposes until fairly recently. It was used as a fuel before the easy transport of coal and found very good for baker's ovens and made a very hot fire for brick and lime kilns. It also provides a good home for nesting birds.



GORSE
Ulex europaeus

Not so easy to see are the little blue flowers of the FIELD SPEEDWELL *Veronica persica* which can be found wherever the ground has been disturbed. We have twenty-two varieties of speedwell in our British Flora, nineteen of them are native, but not the field speedwell which has only been with us since 1815, since when it has managed to spread everywhere. It was discovered in the Lavant by a German, Johann Christian Buxbaum and is sometimes known by his name. He died before Linnaeus the famous Swedish naturalist did botany a very great service in reclassifying all the plants. Before his



COMMON SPEEDWELL
Veronica persica

time the names were chaotic, Buxbaum called his speedwell *Veronica, flosculi, oblongis, pediculus, incedentibus, chamadryas, folio, major*, so you will realize how necessary it had become to simplify things and what a debt we owe to Linnaeus.

Somewhere along the edges of the common can be found the RED DEAD NETTLE *Lamium purpureum*, its Latin name comes from the Greek word for throat and refers to the shape of the flowers with their constricted neck, purpureum from the purplish tinge to the leaves. Although called a nettle it is not one but a member of the Thyme family. This plant has quite a pungent smell but not unpleasant. Records of its existence date back to the Bronze Age and it is known to have been reintroduced here and used by the Romans in their gardens and as a medicine.



RED DEAD NETTLE
Lamium purpureum

So how about looking for these when you take your winter walks on the common?

Mary Page

Editor's note: Mary is reluctant to point out exactly where some of the rare species are on the Commons, and the following letter from

Miss R Neve of Rusthall, underscores her point:

We saw this morning a beautiful orchid in the long grass near Rusthall Church, which my friend was able to photograph later.

Next morning we were sad, but not surprised, to see that it had been picked, and just one spotted leaf remained

CORRESPONDENCE (continued)

APPRECIATION From Mrs B. Akenhead

Mary Cockson-Jones' articles are lovely; and so reminded me of my first introduction to The Rocks in my childhood.

My father suggested I might like to see the 'famous rocks' at Tunbridge Wells, we then lived at Wallington, Surrey, but I cannot remember how we got there (it was about 1909, and I was around 7).

I was absolutely thrilled by The Rocks, especially The Toad which in those days stood out as a rare rock, completely surrounded by lovely green grass. No scrub, nor ugly bushes, elders, brambles, and certainly no stinging nettles galore. I'm sure like that it was much more impressive, and really looked like some wonderful ancient monument.

Since coming here I have learned that these rocks are waterworn and that either an inland lake or even a sea and loch must have produced them originally. Their geology must be fascinating, but so far I have been unable to find a book which deals with them.

Editor's note: Can anyone suggest a book that may answer some of these points?



The clearance behind Fir Tree Car Park has resulted in previously dormant heather seed germinating. Numerous small patches are now visible. We look forward to their development and flowering.

POSTSCRIPT

Members will no doubt have seen the correspondence in the Courier about the clearance at the bottom of London Road. Mention has already been made of this in the Chairman's letter and the Warden's Report. Let us have your views - either to the Warden or at the AGM.

OPEN SPACE

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

CALLING CARTOGRAPHERS

The Committee has a project for two large coloured and illustrated maps - one for each Common - which would show particular points of interest and be displayed on appropriate notice boards, as well as sold to tourists and townspeople to raise funds.

Have we amongst us any members skilled in such productions who could help us? If so please contact Patrick Shovelton.



ROMANOFF LODGE DRAWN BY TONY MAY

ROMANOFF LODGE

Built in 1852 on the site of an old cottage in a gravel pit by Thomas Allfree, founder of Romanoff House School in London Road (now Vale Towers). Allfree had been a tutor to the Russian Royal Family and named his home and school accordingly.



COMMON PROVES RESISTANT TO CHANGE

In this concluding passage from Mary Cockson-Jones's snapshot of early 20th Century Commons life, we are reminded that whilst much does change, some things do not, including the proverbial drunks!

The upper part of the Common was bounded by two main thoroughfares The **'Mount'** as it was briefly called, and at right **angles**, Major York's Road, where traffic from Rusthall turned to meet the town at the Pantiles. It rather sharply divided the Common and was less popular, but held some interesting places - namely, one or two ponds, one small **and** much neglected but an attractive **spot** for children and students of aquatic life such as tadpoles and **waterboatmen**. The other side of the road harboured the site of the old racecourse for donkeys and humans, bearing marks of its existence by its hard-trodden lane, kept free for walkers.

Mount Ephraim, on the contrary, was the equivalent of a promenade at a seaside town, and while children were absorbed in rock-climbing, the older generation thought of Mt. Ephraim and its rural views **as** a place of **rest** and quiet, authority having thoughtfully placed at secluded distances from each other, the comfortable wooden seats (with back!) holding room enough for two or three ladies to relax and chat - one eye, perhaps, for their offspring.

Sunday was the day for promenading in one's "Sunday" clothes with restless, but well-behaved children in tow. Finally, for the really old and well-to-do, was the wide, smooth path and the road, along which **came** the bath chairs in which sat upright old ladies looking as though they

owned the whole Common. They were dressed in long, dark skirts, capes, even fur capes, their hands warmly pushed into muffs, or holding sunshades above their stately heads. Rugs covered their legs (as was **only** proper!). Of course, the thin, bent, old **bath-chair** men had their backs to them anyhow.

There is one area of the Common that I have not yet spoken of, that is, London Road, and for this means the siting of the County School for girls. It was the old and dignified, ivy-covered neighbour **to** Rose Hill School for boys, **but** bore no **relation** to it. It **faced** the **'island'** of grass lying between London Road itself and the **'lane'** of old houses flanking the original road down which rode or came in coaches the society **who** came to **'take the waters'** in the eighteenth century. **In** my day (c.1910) traffic was slow and scanty, compared with today, or **no-one** would **ever** have crossed the main road to get to the other side' in break or lunch time to play rounders, climb the long-suffering hawthorn trees (there were two - one at each end of the Donkey Drive), or set up a temporary wicket for cricket or carry over two heavy wooden stands for stoolball.

All this was **'free time'** - no severe disciplinary mandates to prevent us rambling - so long as we returned at the ring of the bell, back across the **road** to school. Indeed, school **was** a relaxed and

happy place - one lovely morning in Summer it seemed wrong to sit at desks indoors to read "Julius Caesar". I shepherded my class from the Technical Institute in Monson Road across the roads to the sheltered spot and proceeded to organise the readers, placing Mark Anthony on a convenient rock projecting well above my **'stage'**. Suddenly I was surrounded by several excited and alarmed children. They spotted an **'audience'**. An old tramp lay full length asleep below the rock, caring nothing for **the grand speech being made above his head**. "Look, miss! Look!" they shrieked in shouted whispers, "Caesar's body! Miss, Caesar's body!"

This was the Common as I knew it before the First World War, - a playground of beauty enriched by golden gorse, refreshed by cascades of blossom from the May trees. Wherever we went it always seemed fresh and new, inviting and exciting. **Whoever else** enjoyed its loneliness, it was a children's land. The town looked upon it as a great asset. The powers that be saw to it that it remained so.

Mary Cockson-Jones