



COMMON GROUND



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS
AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 8. Autumn 1994

Action call on Travellers

Chairman Patrick **Shovelton** doesn't apologise in the slightest for concentrating on Travellers, a subject that raised its ugly head during the summer.

INVASION

As Steve Budden covers developments of the Commons so thoroughly in his report, I thought I would concentrate in this issue on the thorny problem of Travellers. Every year or so, as residents around Tunbridge Wells Common in particular will know, we get an invasion of Travellers, usually on the Lower Cricket Ground - and they are exceedingly hard to shift.

This year on Saturday 18 June the Lower Cricket Ground was invaded by a particularly large and well-heeled group - the so called Tarmac Gang - who settled down with their numerous caravans (equipped with Satellite TV and Elsans) and drove their L registered BMWs and other fancy cars backwards and forwards across the pitch. They even rode the wrong way up Mount Edgumbe Road (Donkey Walk) to the consternation of one of our members turning to come the right way down and nearly having a head on crash.

Steve Budden was on the spot as quickly as possible that Saturday evening but it was quite clear that the gang had settled in comfortably and had no intention of leaving. The Conservators' policy has been that Travellers should be given three days' grace before any legal action is started. But as it was a weekend and the gang showed no signs of moving, the Conservators, in response to pressure from us, agreed that early on Monday morning 20 June, a notice to quit should be served by Steve. This was treated with contumely - and other action too crude to mention in this wholesome family magazine - and the gang stayed put, going out every day to try and convince local people that their driveways etc needed re-tarmac.

BATTLE

By Friday June 24 when repeated promises "to move in the morning" had come to nothing, the Manor (whose land, of course, it is) made an application to the Court in Tunbridge and a summons was duly served on the leader of the gang on Monday 27 June to appear in Court in three days.

This did the trick and the gang were off the same evening. The legal costs amounted to £669.75.

Eleven days may only, in retrospect, seem a short time in the life of Commons - or indeed in the life of residents around the Lower Cricket Ground. But, for one thing, **no-one** knew at the time how long it was going to take to get rid of the Gang - the law's delays and all that. For another, the caravans and cars and their fierce protective dogs severely reduced the area where people could walk and children could play. For a third, although at first the Gang appeared to be litter-conscious and gave fulsome assurances to Steve, when they left they deposited their **Elsan** contents and other litter in the bushes together with loads of old tarmac. They had also deposited tarmac in the centre of the ground, all of which cost the Conservators a further pretty penny to remove.

DEMANDS

In the light of all this the Friends have made representations to the Conservators, that:-

1. **The defences of the Commons against trespassers should be strengthened (we are very glad that Steve Budden has had big tree trunks sunk in the ground on the north side of the Lower Cricket Ground where the gang's invasion took place and further strengthening of the defences will shortly take place at the southern end too).**

2. **The legal processes should be speeded up. In this type of case we believe that application should be made immediately to the Court. It may prove that the new Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, will help.**

3. **More vigorous action should be taken by the Conservators and the Police to enforce the law on such matters as depositing rubbish and other matter and on dangerous driving. Officers of the Conservators, we are glad to report, have recently held a meeting with the local Constabulary and we are hopeful that the Police will adopt a higher profile if this nuisance occurs again.**

So that is the story of the Battle of the Lower Cricket Ground June 1994. We cannot exactly say it was glorious but we hope for quicker, better, more effective reactions in the future.

WARDEN'S REPORT

SUMMER OF MIXED FORTUNES

It hardly seems like six months since I was last writing for Common Ground. Time flies when you are having fun.

It has been a Summer of mixed fortunes, the grass cutting has gone well but litter has been as bad as ever, in some places worse.

The grass cutting contract was taken over by a new firm this year and although there have been one or two minor problem areas, the overall standard of their work has been very high. The present contract runs for another two years, and some changes will be made to bring more of the Commons edge into the formal mowing regime.

Results have also been encouraging in the areas left to grow until July. Common Spotted Orchids appeared at four sites with also a much heavier crop of Lady's Smock and the spread of Birdsfoot Trefoil.

There has continued to be quite a dramatic spread in the amount of heather regenerating on the clearance adjacent to the Racecourse between Hungershall Park and Major York's Road. At the moment of course the heather is dwarfed by the surrounding grass and has to be looked for, although, as this is written, the flower heads are showing up quite well.

LITTER WORSE

It would be nice to be able to report so positively on the litter problem. Whilst the general standard of cleanliness on the Common is reasonable, some areas are still of concern. The continuing problem around the Forum will hopefully ease during the Winter but has reached appalling proportions during the Summer. This area, along with Wellington Rocks, the Lower Cricket Pitch, Toad Rocks, Rusthall Cricket Pitch, Fir Tree Car Park and Brighton Lake are cleaned five times per week including both Saturday and Sunday. However, this is still not enough. The other problem area this year has been Brighton Lake.

Although this is one of the areas to be cleared five times per week, huge amounts of rubbish have been thrown into the pond itself where of course the litter pickers cannot get it. Money and time have again been expended on having the pond cleaned on a monthly basis, but this is very frustrating when you find rubbish back in it the day after a clean out. As long as people are prepared to dump their litter anywhere, break bottles on the rocks, or otherwise fail to show any consideration or responsibility, this problem will remain with us.

The big story of the year was of course the traveller invasion of the Lower Cricket Pitch. I know Patrick Shovelton is writing about this so I will keep my comments brief. The key to success would be

to keep unwelcome visitors off the Commons to begin with and to this end I will continue to strengthen the perimeter of the Lower Cricket Pitch. The rest of the Commons are not quite so attractive to a potential "invading force" but a series of **lockable** barriers is called for on other access points. It must be remembered though, these travellers can be very determined.

WINTER WORK

Looking ahead to this Winter's work the most dramatic clearance will be on the area bounded by Mount Ephraim, Church Road and London Road. **This area** has already benefited from the installation by the Friends of new railings on the path near St Helena. The next step will be to have all the bramble and bracken cleared from the slope between St Helena and Gibraltar Cottage, and **the** long grass adjacent to Mount Ephraim cut and raked. This will **look** quite raw at first especially on the areas dominated by bramble **but** I am confident we should get cover re-established in the next year or so. The views in both directions of this area are, or were, classic Tunbridge Wells scenes. The intriguing rock formations have become swamped by vegetation and the impression one gets when walking along Mount Ephraim **is** of an untidy **mess**. This work, which will be jointly funded by the Town Centre Management Initiative, should be underway by the end of October.

STEP BY STEP IMPROVEMENTS

Rusthall Common will be also receiving more attention with continuing clearance on the slope of Happy Valley near the One Hundred and One Steps and clearance of some of the less well known areas of Denny Bottom and Bulls Hollow.

Work **will** also get underway to improve the drainage on the Commons paths. This is a major **task** and will probably take **several years** to **complete**. The same applies to storm damaged trees. I have started to carry out a survey **identifying** the most hazardous and unsightly specimens but again this work will take several **seasons**. It must be borne in mind that dead wood and damaged trees are an extremely valuable resource for many creatures so do not expect to see all of this removed.

Work will continue in other areas as **well**. Volunteer days will **be held on** the first Sunday **in** each month. Anyone wishing to join us for all or part of a day will be very welcome. Work parties have a 10.00 am start and we normally gather in Fir Tree Road Car Park. Tools are supplied as is any necessary tuition **and** the emphasis of **the day is on enjoyment**. If you do wish to join us it would be helpful if you could 'phone on Tunbridge Wells **526121** extension **3250** **and let me** know **so that I** can organise the tools required and the task.

SB

OPEN SPACES SOCIETY

The Friends are members of this Society which watches over the interests of Commons generally. Is there any member who would be prepared to be **our** liaison officer with the Society? It does not entail much **work** - only reading their literature and seeing whether we are concerned in any way. If there is such a member would he or she please give their name to the Chairman.

FROM NOMADS TO FREEHOLDERS

Several members have asked whether we could produce in Common Ground a short history of the Commons. Ian Beavis, Assistant Curator of Tunbridge Wells Museum, and a valuable member of the Committee, has kindly agreed to undertake the task. Here, in the first part of his history, he takes us from pre-historic times to the **late** 16th Century.

PART ONE

The earliest known inhabitants of the Commons were the Mesolithic hunters **of** c.3700 BC who led a nomadic lifestyle and employed the various rock outcrops **in** the Tunbridge Wells **area as** camp sites. The rocks were prominent landmarks in the vast Wealden forest, and their sandstone cliffs had convenient overhangs which could be augmented by timber extensions to provide shelter and protection. The characteristic flint implements left by these people have been found near the rocks at Happy Valley and Denny Bottom.

RUSTHALL RECORDED

However, the area does not emerge into history until Saxon times, when the first known mention of Rusthall occurs in a charter of 765 AD in which Egbert King of Kent grants to Dora Bishop of Rochester property at Hailing along with its associated swine pastures including Speldhurst and Rustwell. **The** old spelling 'Rustwell' **is thought** to refer to the chalybeate springs in the area (even the famous Pantiles spring was originally on the Common). Swine pastures were carved out of the Wealden forest in considerable numbers from the 5th century onwards and were known as 'dens'. Bishop's Down, the ancient name of Tunbridge Wells Common may originally **have** been '**Bishop's Den**'. Such pastures were in use for about seven weeks in the autumn when pigs were driven onto them from the settled areas north of the forest **to** be fattened for slaughter by feeding on acorns and beechmast. **In the case of Rusthall** they would have come down the old pre-Roman trackway which is **now** the road through **Tonbridge and Southborough**.

Over the years these forest pastures gradually began to attract a permanent population, and many developed into the Wealden towns and villages of today. But although there was some settlement at Rusthall it never grew into anything large enough to be dignified with the name of a village. Up to the discovery of Tunbridge Wells it remained no more than a scattering of dwellings in an outlying corner of Speldhurst parish. With settlement would have come more extensive clearance of tree cover and the spread of **heathland** vegetation, existing naturally in open places **on** thin soil, over the entire area of the Commons.

MANOR BORN

By **the** end of the 12th century Rusthall had become a manor, with a Lord, Freeholders (who had been granted portions of land by the Lord in perpetuity) and communal grazing lands (the two Commons). There is insufficient evidence to compile a list of early holders of the Manor, but we read in a document from c. 1180 of a certain Heimeric de Rustwell, and in another from 1268 of Hilary de Sutton and his successor **Elias** de Rusthall, a benefactor of Groombridge Church (also in Speldhurst parish). Where exactly these early Lords of the Manor lived is also unknown. John **Colbran's guide of 1839 reports four long** demolished buildings all of which were claimed by local tradition to have once been the manor house.

EARLIEST SURVIVING COTTAGE

The **descendants** of Elias de Rusthall are said to have continued to own the Manor until around 1450, when it was **sold** to Richard Waller of Groombridge Place. His descendants are said to have sold it to a certain George Stacey in 1583/4, who in **turn** sold it to Robert Byng some time before 1595. The population of the Manor through this period would **have** been quite **small**: a document of 1521 names eleven freeholders, probably living in farmhouses dotted around the borders of Rusthall Common, which is the pattern we see in the earliest (18th century) maps. Only one dwelling survives from **these times, Two Yews Cottage at** the southern end of Lower Green Road, which in its present form dates from the **late** 16th century.

IB

FRIENDS FUND SUPPORT

The Friends literally gave a supporting hand to Commons users with the funding of new railings opposite the Beau Nash.

The left hand side of the pathway leading down from Mt Ephraim towards the London **Road/** Church Road junction has for some years been a place of danger.

The former **railings** were broken **in** some places and non-existent in others, and the drop would have **been** severe, **even for** the partly or wholly inebriated from the delights of the Beau Nash.

So the Committee suggested to the Conservators (who readily agreed) that we should fund new railings for this **spot**. **Dave** Sissons found some old ones cheap and they are now in place, firmly concreted in, **at a total expense of** £1255. A suitable plaque commemorating this effort of the Friends will shortly be placed on the railings

WINTER WORK

Once again Warden Steve Budden has organised a programme of invigorating Sunday morning **activity**. Do join us, tools and training provided. Do not think the work is beyond you - heavier or lighter - tasks are available for all ages. Stay as **long** or as short a time as you wish.

- November 6th Denny Bottom
- December 4th Sycamore Removal
- January 8th Path Widening
- February 5th Tree Planting
- March 5th Grassland Maintenance
- April 2nd Coppicing

For full information contact Steve **on** (0892) **526121** Ext. 3250.

LITTER PICK

As distinct **from** the poor turnout for the work party on 2nd October (see back page), the litter pick on Sunday 9th was well supported.

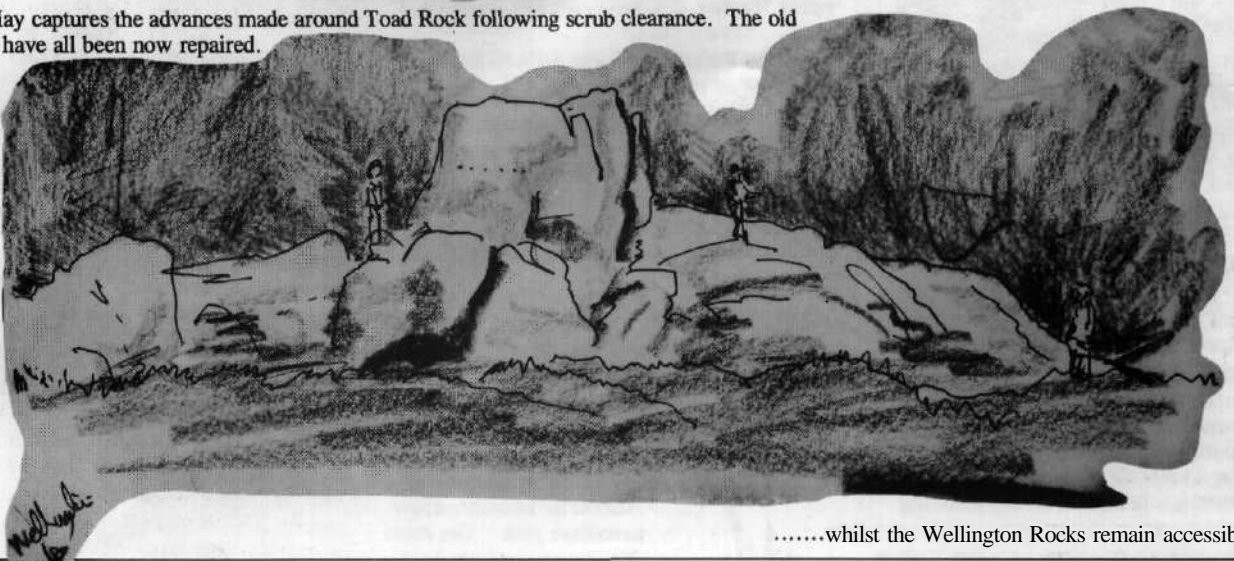
Twelve Friends got to work on Tunbridge Wells Common, and four on Rusthall. As usual we unearthed some strange objects - one gas meter, taken away by the police to try and identify the owner - and one windscreen from a car, sadly not marked by a number. Otherwise the volunteers succeeded in getting to many places which the contractor litter-picker does not or cannot reach.

This problem of litter is an ever present one. I believe things are better than when we started in 1991, but an awful lot remains to be done. Some of us think that the Conservators' litter contract should be extended **and** made tougher. It is a matter we are taking up with the Conservators.

WPS



Tony May captures the advances made around Toad Rock following scrub clearance. The old railings have all been now repaired.



.....whilst the Wellington Rocks remain accessible for all.

BEWARE THE KING CHARLES BOYS

In response to requests for members' memories of the Commons, Felicity Sturt kindly put pen to paper. It would be nice to make this a regular feature, so please send any submissions to the Editor.

Unlike a Professor of history's memory, mine of Tunbridge Wells Common will be inexact, unchronological and illuminated by fable. What is shared is the stricture to beware of the boys from King Charles school.

Perhaps, ten years on, the memories will become more vivid and maybe(?) more accurate. Meanwhile, recollections must come from the period 1930-1946 when we lived near the Top.

"Along the Top" was important. One way we went to the shops, hairdresser, cobbler, baker, chemist and the hospital; turn right and we walked along the Top, for exercise, to visit grandparents, to attend the surgery, then father's workplace, to have breakfast with Dadda at the Earl's Court, to reach the warmth and rest of the South of France. (Only the South of France was where I learned that my cosy world of being the 'baby of the family, (though I'm not a baby)' was about to be altered by the

arrival of a proper baby.) From the Top and across the Common could be viewed the spread of Tunbridge Wells, the skyline in a hollow, the comforting Trinity clock, then the time easily read, the green domes of the Opera House, the gleam of the new Town Hall.

The Common was a place to be explored, mostly with Barrie. With the Gubbins boys from down the road we would play 'gun games' in the triangle of the Top, London Road and Church Road. It was here, one evening, that we tried to toboggan, having been too scared by other children to do it during the day, only to find that our success was limited by a thaw and resulting mud.

We would venture further only in the company of Ann (Ed. - Ann Revell, Felicity's sister) or adults until we had mastered our bicycles and could roam wider. The Wellington Rocks were a magnet and much enjoyed, though the uses to which the crevasses were sometimes put, could make the place uninviting. The nearby toilets must be an improvement.

Wartime summer evenings were frequently spent at the Higher Cricket Ground where we were often

entrusted with the Scoreboard and Barrie might even be called upon to fill in the scoresheet. Fir Tree Road was seldom crossed, though after a doodlebug fell the area beyond was visited to see the progress of the defoliated oak tree.

Only now do I see on the current map that the road we knew as the 'Donkey Drive' is named Mt Edgcumbe Road, but then that is logical as the Mt Edgcumbe Hotel was always there. The houses that dot the Common now seem much better cared for and with less forbidding shrubberies around them than in our childhood when we hoped that peering eyes would not report our doings. At one time we were known as 'the Buckingham reds' from our distinctive red jerseys. Mother favoured practical play clothes and before anoraks we relied on woollen jerseys, worn in layers, and balaclavas.

One of the pleasures of returning to Tunbridge Wells is to find the Common, still a draw for dog walkers, still a good place to stretch one's legs, a place for a breath of air between home and town; a place to witness the changing seasons.

Felicity Sturt

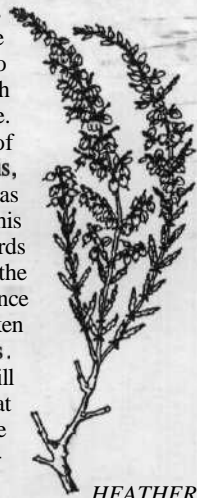
(Member of the family which has so kindly donated ten new benches to the South of France)

The Gift of Heather

If the regeneration of heather continues perhaps we'll be able to make and sell useful gifts made from heather to raise funds, such as described by Mary Page in this her third seasonal note on Common flora. Drawings by Harold Page.

FLOWERS OF THE COMMON 3

As I write these notes summer has drawn to a close but there are still flowers to be seen on the Common which will last until the frosts arrive. The purple spikes of **HEATHER** *Calluna vulgaris*, used to grow over large areas here at the beginning of this century; look at old postcards and you will see how the Common has changed since then as the trees have taken over in many places. Nevertheless there are still patches of it and I noticed that more is growing where the Common Ground workforce has been busy. It is a great favourite with the butterflies and bees. Here in the South it is a flower to enjoy but in the North of Scotland, it was not only a plant for honey-making bees but until recently it was essential to the frugal way of life there. In the Isle of Lewes, the museum has a special display to show all the things for which heather was used. Roofs were thatched with it, a comfortable bed was made of it as were baskets, ropes and buckets. An orange dye was obtained from it and it was used as a fodder for their sheep. A very important plant indeed.

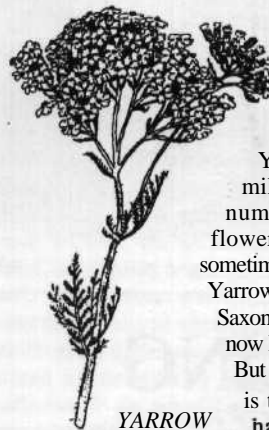


HEATHER
Calluna vulgaris

In one place on the Common can be found **TANSY** *Tanacetum vulgare* with its bright yellow button-like flowers. It is a native plant usually found by riverbanks where it starts to flower in July, and one of our oldest herbs. Cakes and puddings were made flavoured with young Tansy leaves and at Easter special cakes were baked called Tansies. They may have been traditional but not very palatable as one old writer called Tansy Pudding "a nauseous dish" for the leaves are very bitter, so I like to think that Tansies were eaten as a penance for Good Friday rather than as a treat for Easter Day.



TANSY
Tanacetum vulgare



YARROW
Achillea millefolium

A tough little plant to be found everywhere including the Common is **YARROW** *Achillea millefolium* with its numerous daisy-like flowers, usually white, sometimes pink. The name Yarrow comes from Anglo-Saxon times, but no one now knows what it means. But in Greek mythology it is the flower reputed to have been used by Achilles to staunch the wounds of his warriors, hence its

Latin name *Achillea* and *millefolium* refers to its ferny leaves. Country names include Soldiers Woundwort and Carpenters Grass because it was used to heal cuts caused by metal weapons or tools, but can anyone tell me why people in Hampshire called it 'Hemming and Sewing' because I have no idea.

In September the most attractive **ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB** *Chamaenerion angustifolium* is still showing the last of its bright pink flowers and heads of feathery seeds. Known as **Fireweed** in America as it springs up in the burnt earth after forest fires. It was a rare plant in this country until this century. A local flora by Richard Deacon of 1870 gives one or two sites near **Tunbridge Wells** and a well-known botanist I know, tells of his grandfather placing wire netting round a specimen on his land as it was such a rarity. With the coming of the motor car and the rise in cigarette smoking in the 20's and 30's heath fires became more common and **sodid Rosebay**. And fifty years ago it became famous as the flower of **the bombsites** in London after the last war, plenty of **burnt earth** there, and now it is common especially on railway banks and other waste places, which is not surprising as each plant can produce about 80,000 feathery seeds which can easily be blown over wide areas.



ROSEBAY
WILLOWHERB
Chamaenerion angustifolium

Mary Page

VOLUNTEER WORK (SIC)

The first volunteer work of the autumn season was carried out on Sunday 2nd October, clearing scrub, rubbish and unwanted sycamore and silver birches from around Toad Rock.

A party of Community Service workers under their organiser also cleared and strimmed a large area of bracken and scrub in the same neighbourhood. Two Duke of Edinburgh award students also did good clearance work in the area of **Bull's Hollow**.

Regrettably the help of the Friends was more noticeable for its absence, only the Chairman turning up. It is to be hoped that more of our members will be able to turn out on the remaining dates of the work programme, as set out on page three.

S.B.

BRIEFLY

SUMMER WALK

Ian Beavis conducted a further Summer walk round the Commons on July 9th. The morning event around Tunbridge Wells Common was well attended, though fewer joined him in the afternoon around Rusthall Common. Ian has kindly agreed to repeat the exercise next Summer. Details in future issues.

BENCH DONATED

Members will wish to know that Dave Sissons, our ironwork man, has presented a new Hawthorn replica bench to the **Friends**, and this is sited on the knoll in the Dell beside London Road. We are much indebted to Dave for his generosity.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW

Your Committee put in a submission to the Local Government Commission arguing for the status quo. **We have** been extremely well treated by, and have excellent relations with, the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, **and we fear that things would not** be the same with a unitary authority or a new District.

NEW YEAR DINNER

A dinner has been arranged at the Spa Hotel on Friday 20th January. The enclosed leaflet gives more details. We hope to have a speaker from a neighbouring amenity society. Do come.

OPEN SPACE

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