



COMMON GROUND



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS
AND RUSTHALL COMMON

Issue 11. December 1995

LOTTERY HOPES FOR HAPPY VALLEY PLAN

Steve Budden Reports ..

AS MEMBERS will know from the last issue of Common Ground, the owner of the Beacon Hotel, Mr John Cullen, is hoping to restore and re-open Happy Valley. Following discussions with John, the Conservators have approved the idea of a joint application for Lottery and Millennium funds. If successful, the money will pay for further clearance of the rock faces on the escarpment, the restoration of the 101 steps and the provision of a new access way into Happy Valley as well as the restoration of the gardens.

Members who walk the Commons regularly will have

noticed there seems to have been a big increase in the number of stolen cars dumped and burnt out along the various paths, especially Cabbage Stalk Lane. We have been extremely lucky that major fires have not resulted from these incidents. To try and alleviate the problem, the Conservators are investigating the costs of various types of barriers to make unauthorised access more difficult.

The footpath leading to the new Sainsbury's roundabout was surfaced with stone earlier this year. Although this has solved the problem of the gully down the centre of the path caused by erosion, the prolonged dry summer has stopped the stone binding and resulted in further difficulties. To solve the problem once and for all, this path will be coated with bitumen and gravel.

*In the bright moonlight
the rocks were
a joy to see*

The volunteer season is now under way, three tasks having been undertaken, the first two clearing excess weed growth from some of the ponds. Unfortunately, due to the poor attendance, not as much as I had hoped for was accomplished. Instead of clearing both Bracken and Fir Tree ponds on the first working day, only Bracken pond could be cleared and only half of Marlpit pond was cleared on the second work day. On

Sunday November 4th there was a better turnout for further clearing of the Mt Edgcumbe Rocks and in the bright moonlight that evening the resultant work was a joy to see.

I do, however, hope that more members can respond on the remaining dates. Even a few hours help can make a difference and you might surprise yourselves by enjoying it. The remaining dates are printed below.

The boys from Skinner's School have again spent a day on TW Common carrying out clearance work - this time along Mt Ephraim between the

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CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

People sometimes say to me "Why all this fuss about the Commons? Surely the Commons keep themselves?" Well, Steve Budden's report on this page, covering just the last 4 months, amply demonstrates all that needs to be done. He has dealt with a number of operational issues; let me deal with some rather more political matters.

First, Mt Edgcumbe Hotel. *L'affaire enseigne*, as I put it in the last issue, seems to be coming to a conclusion. The illegal sign on Mt Ephraim will shortly be removed and hopefully one new suitable sign incorporating directions to the hotel and the houses behind will be agreed upon. As for the road widening, only 1 metre of the Commons verge opposite the Hotel now looks likely to now be taken for widening and access to the adjoining houses should become easier. And the hotel tenant appears to have desisted from any more mowing of the Common down from the back of the hotel to Castle Road and depositing rubbish.

Second, Highways. The response to our representations last April about parking on Commons roads has not, to say the least, been

*The Illegal sign on
Mt Ephraim will shortly
be removed*

enthusiastically received by the Highways Department of the Council. The only victories we can report are the advisory white lines drawn on Major York's Road at the Racecourse crossing and on Castle Road by the footpath leading up to Victoria Grove. These have no legal force but are an implied request not to park in the area so marked and, generally, they are achieving their aim. We would, however, like them longer and are saying so.

As for coach parking, Highways conducted a survey of coaches parked during a week in July in the Linden Park Road coach park and on London Road. For this specimen period there were a maximum of 9 coaches using Linden in any one hour and a maximum of 7 coaches using London Road on 2 days for 1 hour. This in itself was surprising as we have photographs showing 10 coaches parked at a time in London Road (which is supposed to be for 6 coaches only). Curiously enough, since the survey, and since the attention of coach operators was drawn to other parking places, coach parking on London Road - and the eyesore it creates - seems to have diminished. Your Committee, together with the Conservators and Town Centre Management (TCM), intend to maintain their representations on this whole subject.

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DIARY DATES

Please take note of the following dates:

WORK PARTIES

- JAN 7th - Tree Planting
- FEB 4th - Tree Planting
- MAR 4th - Scrub Clearance (Toad Rock)

All work parties start at 10.00am at Fir Tree Road car park except for March 4th when we meet at Toad Rock. Old clothes, gloves, and food and drink recommended. Tools provided.

MEETINGS/EVENTS

- JAN 26th - Annual Dinner, Spa Hotel, 7pm for 7.45pm
- MAR 6th - AGM, Town Hall 7.15pm for 8pm. Drinks first.
- MAY 25th - Annual Guided Walk with Ian Beavis
- JUN 14th - Private View of Commons Exhibition, Museum, 7.15pm- 8.45pm

BOOK NOW FOR A DAME GOOD EVENING

Members are reminded to book as soon as possible for the Annual Dinner.

We are fortunate to have secured Dame Jennifer Jenkins, wife of Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, as guest speaker at the dinner, to be held on Friday 26th January at the Spa Hotel - 7pm for 7.45pm.

Dame Jennifer is Chairman of the Royal Parks Review Board and was Chairman of the National Trust from 1986 - 1990. She also has experience of running a local preservation group, having chaired the North Kensington Amenity Trust.

What she has to say should therefore be of great relevance to us.

For tickets please contact Sylvia Luckhurst at the Town Hall, enclosing a cheque made payable to The Spa Hotel for £16 per head.

CHAIRMAN'S LETTER (Contd.)

Continuing with Highways, the authorities have now started work in improving the pedestrian crossings to the Common from Castle Street and at the bottom of Castle Road. It is to be hoped that the final results will be beneficial to the Commons walker (including the disabled) and aesthetically pleasing. Also perhaps we can now at last move on, with TCM (Town Centre Management) help, to replace the ghastly aluminium type railings (now run into and all askew) that disgrace the crossing from the Common to the old Vale Road Post Office.

So much is going on. We now look forward to Christmas, to the Annual Dinner where Dame Jennifer Jenkins will be speaking and to the AGM in March.

MATERIAL SOUGHT FOR COMMONS EXHIBITION

An extensive Exhibition of the post 18th Century Commons will take place in the Museum from 14th - 27th June 1996 showing not just pictures engravings and prints, but photographs and artefacts.

If any member has any old or modern photographs of the Commons which he or she thinks might qualify for exhibiting, will they please get in touch with Ian Beavis, Assistant Curator at the Museum, who is organising the show. He particularly needs striking photos of the hurricane damage of October 1987.

There will also be a private view for members (with drinks and eats) on the evening of June 14th, 7.15- 8.45pm.

CONSERVATION TO RESTORE

THE HISTORY OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS & RUSTHALL COMMONS - PART 4

The Freeholders' supremacy over the Commons was finally brought to an end by the establishment of the Conservators in 1890. This followed a decade of controversy, beginning in 1882 with claims on the part of the Local Board (the town's original government) and other prominent townsmen that the Freeholders were becoming too lax in permitting encroachments. There had long been a practice of permitting the occupiers of property on or adjacent to the Commons to take over small portions of land on payment of an annual rent, but now there were requests for larger enclosures. This resulted from the fact the dwellings situated on the Commons originally owned only the land on which they stood. This had not been a problem when they were mere workmen's cottages, but when they were rebuilt as desirable Victorian residences the owners became unhappy that the general public had a right to walk up to their property and peer through their windows.

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The most heavily criticised incident occurred when the Freeholders' Committee gave permission to W E Moxon, owner of St Helena Cottage, to "enclose a portion of the rocks and Common with an iron fence". The Local Board protested that "the recent enclosures and obstructions were illegal", while local solicitor Frank William Stone, along with his brother Frederick, launched a personal campaign to change the Freeholders' policy. The Stones owned land within the Manor boundary and so were entitled to register as Freeholders. Gathering together sixteen eligible supporters including the Tunbridge ware maker Thomas Barton, they submitted their names to the Freeholders' Committee in October 1882. Initially there was resistance, the meeting resolving that "the claims of the above... have not been made out to the satisfaction of the Committee". Several of the campaigners appeared at the Annual Meeting of the Freeholders a month later, but were ejected.

By the time of their meeting in February 1883, the Freeholders' Committee had been forced to

Nightingales

For several days, I wondered what this strange bird was, sitting on a wall, eight feet from my classroom window, singing so loudly that I sometimes had to close the window in order to make myself heard! The song was beautiful and unusual, although the bird itself was very ordinary. A little larger than a robin, plain brown with a pale underside. My colleagues, amused at my excitement (and ignorance), eventually told me that it was a nightingale, and that these birds were regular visitors to Rusthall Common,

Wednesday, August 16th 1797, DIVERSIONS On TUNBRIDGE-WELLS Common.

Will be given on the above Day, by the Gentry Visitors, to promote holiday Happiness, the following Prizes :

AT 10 O'CLOCK.

A grand Match of Stool-Ball, between 11 Ladies of Suffolk, in Pink, against 11 of Kent, in Blue Ribbands.

// is required that none of the above Ladies will wear flack Stockings, or have their Hair powdered.

AT TWELVE.

An Afs Race for a Cheffire Cheefe of a Guinea value.

Not less than Six to start.—Riders to have one Spur and a Whip —No Slid or Boots will be allowed, nor yet Silk Jackets or Caps. To run according to the King's-Plate Articles.

AT ONE.

A Jingling Match.

N-B. No Clerk of a Parish, or Grave-Digger will be allowed, least an unintentional Solemnity should pervade the Match.

AT TWO.

Four Men to smoke for a Hat.

No Punch, or Maderia will be allowed the Amateurs. —Snelltonians not excepted

AT HALF PAST TWO.

The second Heat for the Cheffire Cheefe.

AT THREE.

A pair of London-made Dancing Pumps, to be Jump'd for in Sacks.

AT HALF PAST THREE.

A Holland Chemise, or Linen Convenience, of large Dimensions.

To be run for, by young Ladies, whose Characters are unspotted.—The second Belt will have a pair of Cotton Stockings, the Third, a pair of Scarlet Garters.

AT FOUR.

Six Men to drive Wheelbarrows blindfolded.

If any Disputes arise, to be referred to the Jockey Club.

These diversions were staged on the Common, see the promotional poster above, and what was clearly a jolly event is to be recreated in a joint venture with the Conservators and the Council's Leisure Services Department.

The idea is to replicate it as far as possible on a Saturday in August 1997, on the Lower Cricket

Ground. Unfortunately a horse race round the Old Racecourse has been vetoed by the experts as unsafe.

Members are invited to contribute any ideas on costumes, events and, of course, assistance. More info in due course.

DORS FORMED RE ORDER

concede that there was no legal reason to exclude the eighteen new applicants, and they were registered without further argument. In May a further list of twenty names was submitted and accepted, including prominent members of the Local Board. The newcomers now had a clear majority over their opponents, and the stage was set for a takeover of the Freeholders' Committee. The Freeholders' Annual Meeting in November 1883 was a rowdy affair at which the Chairman John Stone Wigg (later the town's first mayor) had a hard time keeping order. Frank Stone's supporters arrived in force, outnumbering the regular members, and succeeded in electing an entirely new Committee from among their number. The vote was greeted by shouts of protest from the opposition, who tried to argue that it was technically invalid, but the chairman (who as leader of the Local Board would have been on the newcomers' side) overruled them. A vote was also carried to the effect that "all obstructions, posts and rails, and chain fencing between Onslow House and Romanoff Lodge and Mount Edgcumbe House be forthwith removed".

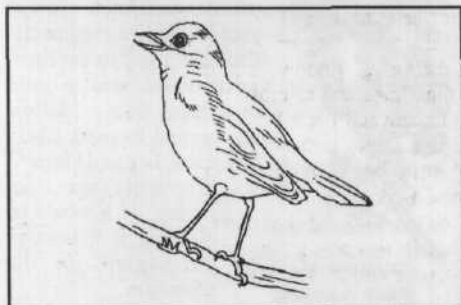
In later years Frank Stone was credited with 'saving the Commons', which was doubtless an exaggeration, but the election of the new Committee did mark a return to the stricter policy of earlier times. However, what were seen as positive developments were not ruled out. In

In 1885-6 the Lower Cricket Ground was levelled to relieve pressure on the older ground

1885-6 the Lower Cricket Ground was levelled to relieve pressure on the older ground on Tunbridge Wells Common, and Rusthall Common was provided with a formal cricket ground for the first time. The Lower Cricket Ground had earlier been used informally as a playing field by the boys of Romanoff House School in London Road, and it was also the site of the annual bonfire on November 5th which the Freeholders had permitted since 1860 in an effort to eliminate the traditional custom of indiscriminate firing of the gorse bushes. In 1886 a scheme was brought forward to purchase the old forge and associated buildings at Fonthill, to demolish them, and to return the land to the open Common, but due to the change of administration four years later (which will be dealt with in the next issue), the project was never brought to completion.

IB

in the Common



1947, I was then teaching. I was thrilled to have this full-throated creature virtually on my doorstep, and I gradually became aware that the more noise the boys made, the louder the bird sang.

I left the school two years later, but often visited the Common thereabouts to hear that splendid song again.

But, where have the nightingales gone now? For years we have had not sign of them. Why is this? Can anyone tell me? More importantly, what must we do to entice them back?

John Spare

The Dippers' Tale

ROGER FARTHING dips into the competitive world of the town's early beauties.

One of the earliest documents held by the secretary to the Freehold Tenants of Rusthall Manor tells of a dispute which the Lord of the Manor was called upon to sort out in 1768. Dr George Kelley had purchased the Manor of Rusthall ten years before for £12,000, a considerable sum at the time. Where the money came from is uncertain but a fair guess would be that the chalybeate spring and its wealthy devotees had something to do with the matter. The doctor (by now Sir George Kelley) therefore had a double interest in the smooth running of the spring - medical and manorial.

The preamble to this document provides an interesting commentary on the early history of the town, seen from the perspective of 1768. The place where the spring was discovered was "a Barren Heath or Common called Bishops Down" and as there were at that time no Houses near the said Springs the persons resorting thither to Drink the Waters were under the necessity of Hiring Houses for their Lodgings and Accommodation at such Distance from the Water as they could get them and a great Number of Houses were Built for that purpose at Southborough Nonesuch Green and Rusthall Common and the persons Drinking the Waters were accustomed to ride from their Lodgings to the Wells and there Drink the Waters and Return.

EARLY DIPPERS

It was at or about this period of time the Convenience and Utility of having proper persons ready at the Wells to Dip the Waters for the Company was so Obvious and Apparent that the Measure was no sooner proposed than it was adopted and the Lord of the Manor appointed some Decent Women to attend for that purpose and the Choice was generally made of the Wives, Widows or Daughters of the Freehold Tenants of the said Manor and a place or Shed near the said Wells or Springs of Water was Built for the Women to attend in and was called Dippers Hall and the Contributions of the Gentry who drank the Waters enabled the Dippers to make a Decent and Cleanly Appearance and procured them a Comfortable Subsistence.

In process of time the resort of Company to the Wells being very Great a Large Number of Houses were Built for their Reception nearer to

the Wells namely at Mount Ephraim, Mount Pleasant, the Culverden, Mount Sion and at Length very near the Wells themselves and the Usefulness of the Dippers in their Ready and obliging attendance on the Company Contributed to their Establishment and Continuance in their Office and Employment".

At the beginning of 1768 the dippers decided to pool their takings. The reason was, as they put it, "to Discontinue for the future the Impertinence of Solliciting the Company to Employ this or that particular Dipper". Sir George Kelley thought it was a good idea and advised the dippers to prepare an agreement and have it signed by them all. This they did but one of them, Dorcas Baker "absolutely refused to Comply therewith notwithstanding repeated applications were made to her for that purpose".

MISS TUNBRIDGE WELLS 1768?

The document does not reveal Dorcas Baker's motives but we can reasonably infer that she was doing better than her colleagues from the old arrangement; and why should that be? Could it have anything to do with the fact that the other dippers were all wives and Dorcas was the only spinster? Could it be - perish the thought - that she was the prettiest? The document does not give the ages of the dippers but it does say how long they had been doing the job. Elizabeth Weller had the longest service - 30 years - followed by Ann Cripps - 20 years. Elizabeth Fry had done 9 or 10 years, Susanna Mercer and Sarah Fry 3 years each, Ann Okill a few months only and what about Dorcas Baker? Well, it appears that she came in to replace her grandmother who had died in 1758 after a long period of service.

None of this tells us what the delightful dippers looked like and commercial photography was a hundred years in the future. All we know is that dear Dorcas continued obdurate and the Freehold Tenants' document takes the form of a legal

A storm in a chalybeate basin

opinion which led to an instruction to Mr Scoones, the Tonbridge lawyer (of the firm which continues to this day as our corporate member Thomson Snell and Passmore), to commence an action against Miss Baker.

The outcome of this storm in a chalybeate basin unfortunately remains veiled in the mists of history. The only clue is provided by Richard Pelton's 1881 reprint of the Rusthall Manor Act 1739 to which has been appended, for reasons unstated by on the order of the Lord and Freeholders at their Annual Meeting held at the 'Hand and Sceptre' on the 15th November 1880, the dippers' agreement of 27th May 1768 to share their income - that very agreement with which Dorcas Baker had absolutely refused to comply. I conclude that it remained in force until 1880 and beyond and that Dorcas must have lost her case.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The spring dried up for a fortnight last August. Whether this was due to the exceptionally dry summer or to adjacent building works, we do not know. But, glad to say, the spring flows freely again now].

In her fifth article Mary Page **describes** ephemerals

Several vacancies exist within the realms of the **Friends**, and noting an understandable reluctance to contribute to physical work, perhaps members would consider taking on one or another of the following:-

DISTRIBUTORS - We have a general need for literature distributors, but especially in the Culverden/St John's Road and Pantiles/Broadwater Down areas.

EDITOR - This is likely to be the last edition of Common Ground under the stewardship of Mark Roelofsen. The job is very interesting, **and** like all creative work highly satisfying when it comes off the press. One hopes it is an enjoyable read and well presented, and I can assure you that once all the material is in its layout does not take too long. There must be someone out there who has a few hours to spare three times a year, who is equipped with a ruler, pencil, calculator and keen eye for headlines and bylines. **Please** contact Patrick if you'd like a job description.

[Chairman's Note: This entry by the Editor has come as a **bombshell**. Mark has been Editor and PR front for the Friends since our inception in 1991. **He has done a tremendous job**, particularly when so busy with so many other commitments. We all owe him a great debt of **gratitude**].

Steve **Budden** Reports *Contd. from page 1*

drive to Mt Edgcombe Hotel and Church Road. Invading **bracken**, bramble and scrub were cleared from the edges of the grassland and in the process the Skinner's boys uncovered yet another of the old Hawthorn benches which will **now** be **restored**.

Another volunteer litter-pick was held on September 30th. Although much useful work was done, again numbers **were** sadly down on previous occasions. The Conservators spend around **£11,000 per year** on litter collection, but in spite of this litter still is, **and I suspect always** will be, a problem. The volunteer litter-picks organised by the Friends are a vital part of the effort, especially in the newly cleared areas - so please help- if you can.

The plans for an all-ability access trail around the Higher Cricket Ground on Tunbridge Wells Common seems to be gathering support. There are still several problems to be solved in the crossing of Fir Tree Road, but it is hoped that construction of the first phase should start in 1996.

At the same time the Conservators have launched an appeal to raise enough money to remove all remaining concrete benches around the Upper Cricket Ground and replace them with 15 new Hawthorn benches. In addition there will be 5 new benches on Rusthall Common, 3 of them round the cricket ground and 2 in the Toad Rock area. All this is in memory of Mrs **Kentner**, the late Lady of the Manor, and the Conservators are most grateful to the Friends for their donation of **£1,500** to the Fund. If both these schemes are successful, it should make a great difference to what are the most popular areas of the Commons.

Work is now starting on this winter's tasks. As many of you will have noticed, further **work** has started to regain the grassland to the north of Church Road. Bracken has been removed and it is encouraging to see the first flush of new grass appearing already. Drainage work has been

I have recorded over 500 plants growing on the Commons and most of **them have been established** for a long time. But there is one group of plants appearing for a year or so and then dying out which I call ephemerals and they come because the ground has been disturbed.



BRISTLY OX-TONGUE
Picris echinoides

It happened a few years ago at the bottom end of Major York's Road where the corner was covered with new soil and an **amazing** number of ephemerals appeared. Here I found **COMMON POPPY** *Papaver rhoeas*, the well-known flower of the cornfield as well as **BRISTLY OX-TONGUE** *Picris echinoides*, a distinctive yellow flower of the **Compositae** family. It is about 1-2ft high and extremely bristly. Its stems and leaves are pimply with large bristles which of course explained its English name; the leaves very much resemble the rough tongue of an ox. It is a plant of wastelands and disturbed ground.

A KILLER ON THE COMMON

In 1991 a quantity of earth was tipped on the Common by Castle Road and for the next year or so some unusual plants appeared. One of them was **HEMLOCK** *Conium maculatum*, usually found by rivers, a tall **Umbellifer**, 3 to 7ft high and a very poisonous plant which was reputedly responsible for the death of Socrates. Imagine his last hours if it were *Conium maculatum* that was administered to him. The general symptoms are to quote Geoffrey Grigson in *The Countryman's Flora*, "Salivation, bloating, dilation of the pupils,



HEMLOCK
Conium maculatum

carried out around the Marlpit pond on Rusthall Common so hopefully the area will be a little more accessible this winter. The row of lime trees opposite Brighton Lake will be re-pollarded at the end of November and the stumps in the newly thinned woodland edge behind Brighton Lake will be **ground**, out to allow easier maintenance next year, as will the windblown stumps remaining on the regenerating heath land/grassland area adjacent to the Racecourse. There will be further clearance of holly and sycamore along Apsley Street to allow light to reach the remaining heather and bilberry and to expose more of the rock faces, and more work will be carried out alongside London Road opposite Vale road.

Finally, I am sorry to have to report that 8 of the 40 lime trees planted to form the third row of the **Royal Victoria Grove have been** vandalised. The trees have been snapped about a foot above the ground in what was a peculiarly mindless attack. I know many people, including myself, have been very upset by this act. The trees will be replaced this winter.

rolling of the eyes, laboured inspiration, diminished frequency of breathing, irregular heart action, loss of sensation, convulsions, uncertain gait, falling and at the end complete paralysis. The mind usually remains clear to the end". This is indeed a toxic plant and children have been poisoned by making whistles and blow-pipes of the hollow, purple spotted, stems but nevertheless it is a very handsome plant to look at.

Another ephemeral still to be found there this year, completely different from Hemlock, is **SMOOTH TARE** *Vicia tetrasperma*, a small, straggly plant of the Peaflower family, usually found on arable land and nothing at all to do with the tares mentioned in the Bible, which belong to the Grass family.

Last year the footpath adjoining the Common on Mt Ephraim was repaved and the edge of the Common was disturbed and again the ephemerals appeared. Firstly a small member of the Crucifer family, **PENNY CRESS** *Thlaspi arvense*. Its

white flowers are inconspicuous and the whole plant can be easily overlooked until it comes into seed when its big round seedpods looking like small coins become noticeable and one can understand why

it is called Penny-cress. It too is a weed of arable land as is a little flower which seems to appear wherever the soil is disturbed and which was also on the Common this summer. It is the attractive **SCARLET PIMPERNEL** *Anagallis arvensis* and is known in the country-side as Poor Man's Weatherglass as its flowers open at about 8am and close about 3pm and even refuse to open at all if the weather is wet or humid. Other country names with a meteorological ring to them are Change in the Weather and Shepherd's Sundial.

Lastly the plant which gave me most pleasure to see growing along Mt Ephraim this year was **COMMON MALLOW** *Malva sylvestris*, a pretty, pinkish, purple flower and a relation of our garden hollyhocks. This was one of the plants introduced into this country by the Romans and used by them as a vegetable. County names

of Cheese Cakes or Fairy Cheeses refer to the seed cases which are cheese-shaped, round and flat similar to Dutch cheeses and divided into segments. Children used to eat them and they are said to taste like monkey-nuts. Mallow is a perennial so more likely to get established and I hope it does so in spite of danger from mowing, as it would be pleasing if it became permanent on the Common.



COMMON MALLOW
Malva sylvestris