



COMMON GROUND



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 13. Autumn 1996

Five years of progress!

By the time this issue of Common Ground hits the newstands we will have been in existence for over 5 years. For those who were not present at the time it may be interesting to recall that the initial meeting setting up the Friends was held on 30 August 1991.

We had booked the meeting room in Monson House expecting no more than 60 people. But over 100 arrived - indicating the strength of feeling there was at that time about the state of the Commons. Hurriedly it was ascertained that the Council Chamber of the Town Hall was free and we all trooped round there - good for publicity. The meeting was pretty vociferous, with Rodney Stone as Chief Executive to T.W.B.C. and Clerk to the Conservators, ably fielding many of the questions. At the end of the meeting it was unanimously decided to set up the Friends - on the model of the Friends of Ashdown Forest. The first Committee and officers were there and then elected and we were in business.

But behind the scenes much preparatory work had been done. It was no good setting up the Friends - or at any rate we would have had much less influence - without the agreement of the Conservators. When some of us started on this path in 1987 when the Commons were in a devastated state after the hurricane I can well remember a meeting with Jack Girling, the Clerk at the time, who told me "Oh, THEY (that is the Conservators) don't want to know about THAT (ie, the idea of a Friends body being set up). THEY were afraid that we would be busy-body interventionists, double-guessing all the time the Conservators' decisions. Eventually calmer counsels prevailed and a "Concordat" was entered into setting up the relationship between the Friends and the Conservators. The main point was that we should have a place (though not a vote) at Conservators meetings, and that all our writings and publicity should be approved by them in advance. These provisions still apply today and a copy of the "Concordat" is reproduced alongside so that the Roger Farthings of the future can have

it in their files. But the words and the small print have over the intervening years, proved of little importance. What has proved of importance has been the ever-closer growing relationship between the two bodies and the monies we have raised over the years - over £10000 now - that has been devoted to improvements - such as new seats, railings, repairs, new plantings - which would not otherwise have been done - or at any rate not done so quickly.

To commemorate our first five years we plan, in the autumn, with the agreement of the Conservators, to make two plantings of special trees - one on Tunbridge Wells Common and one on Rusthall.

For the rest it has been a comparatively uneventful summer. There is, of course, a desperate shortage of water, as Steve Budden notes on his report on page 4, but the natural vegetation of the Commons seems to be surviving remarkably unscathed and, touch wood, there have been no serious fires even in this dry weather.

The Museum Exhibition, in June, was outstanding and it must be hoped this can become a biennial event - so that new members and new residents and visitors can see the history of these remarkable limbs of the District. Ian Beavis' memoir "Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons - Past and Present" (2nd edition) published for the occasion and on sale at the Museum for £1.25 is a must for all members.

Now we look forward to the season of autumn and winter work (dates below) and to the Annual Dinner at the Spa Hotel (one of our most faithful Corporate members) in January - date yet to be finally fixed with The Rt. Hon. Lord Griffiths. MC, Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, who will be our principal guest.

Terms of Reference agreed with the Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators

- (a) The Friends of Tunbridge Wells Commons (hereinafter referred to as "the Friends") will generally support the Conservators in the preservation and maintenance of the Commons and will raise public awareness of the importance of the Commons to Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding areas.
- (b) The Friends acknowledge the duty of the Conservators to ensure that the Commons are preserved and developed as Commons (as opposed to formal parkland) and will have regard to any Management Plan currently adopted by the Conservators.
- (c) Both the Friends and the Conservators may present to each other any proposals for mutual assistance/activity, etc. and the Conservators will meet all reasonable requests for information and/or meetings between the Friends and the Conservators.
- (d) The Friends shall nominate a representative who shall be entitled to attend meetings of the Commons Conservators subject to the representative not having any voting rights but able to speak with the consent of the Chairman of the Commons Conservators. The Chairman shall have power to preclude temporarily the representative of the Friends from being present for a particular item or items if this is deemed by him to be expedient.

Voluntary Work Carried Out Organised by the Friends

Any voluntary work to be organised or carried out by the Friends shall be in accordance with a programme of work previously agreed with the Conservators acting through their Clerk and/or Surveyor for the time being and agreed in writing (unless the work is urgently required) and subject to the Conservators, acting through their Clerk and Surveyor, being satisfied that adequate insurance cover is operative for the work in question.

Fund-Raising and Publicity

The Friends shall organise such publicity and fund-raising as they deem expedient, but any publicity shall be first agreed by the Conservators acting through their Clerk and Surveyor before it is promulgated.

Official Publications

Both the Minutes of the Commons Conservators (with the exception of any Minutes or items considered to be confidential) shall be supplied to the duly appointed representative of the Friends and similarly a copy of any official newsletter produced by the Friends shall be supplied to the Conservators via their Clerk.

THINGS TO DO

Volunteer Work Party Dates for 1996/97

- Wed, 18 SEP — Pond Clearance-Brighton Lake with Kent High Weald Volunteers)
- Sun, 6 OCT — Pond Clearance
- Sun, 3 NOV — Path Widening
- Sun, 1 DEC — Scrub Clearance -Wellington Rocks
- Sun, 5 JAN — Tree Planting
- Sun, 2 FEB — Scrub Clearance -Toad Rock
- Sun, 2 MAR — Path Widening

We hope that many of our younger members — indeed also the fit oldies — will turn out with their families for some or all of these dates. All work parties start at 10 a.m. Meet in Fir Tree Car Park. All tools provided, no experience necessary. Please bring food and plenty to drink, old clothes advisable. For any further information phone Steve Budden on (01892) 526121, ext. 3250.

Autumn Litter Pick

There will also be an Autumn Litter Pick concentrating on those parts of the Commons that the contractors do not normally reach on Sunday 10th November. For Tunbridge Wells Common meet 10 a.m. at Fir Tree Road car park. For Rusthall Common meet 10 a.m. opposite Brahm's P.H. Bring gloves. Bags provided.

The Commons at War

THE HISTORY OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS - Part 6

In 1931, CH Strange gave a lecture to the Tunbridge Wells Natural History Society, in which he related the history of commemorative tree planting on the Commons, including the most recent plantings, near Highbury and leading up to Rusthall Church, to mark the accession and coronation of George V. But he concluded by warning that the number of trees was becoming excessive. "If there is to be any

*almost enough
forest trees*

further tree-planting on the Common", he said, "it is hoped that it will be done with circumspection and foresight. I am inclined to think we have almost enough forest trees. It is a fact that the view from Mount Ephraim, an ever lovely panorama of moorland, field and forest, is becoming more and more intercepted by growing trees. Above all, we ought to aim at a better care and cultivation of the trees we already possess; that they may be protected from injury, cut down and replaced where decayed, and those that are neither useful for shade nor ornamental to look at should be removed". However, further commemorative planting did take place in 1935, to celebrate George V's Silver Jubilee, and on a larger scale for the coronation of George VI in 1937. In the latter year, the 'King's Avenue' of flowering cherries was sited along the Donkey Drive (Mount Edgcombe Road), along with the 'King's Grove' south of Mount Edgcombe (later swamped by invading scrub).

Meanwhile, the Chamber of Trade had also noticed that all was not well on the Commons. In a report

presented to the Conservators in the same year as Strange's lecture, they pointed out that an excessive number of young trees, in particular birches, were springing up, that ponds were silting up, and that the traditional heathland vegetation was diminishing. In subsequent years several prominent local residents complained about problems such as the invasion of bracken and the fact that heather was "rapidly disappearing". No one seems to have realised that the immediate cause of the changes was the decline in grazing, which had ceased altogether by the outbreak of World War II. Wartime conditions then disrupted the management of the Commons, causing unavoidable neglect. Any effective action that the Conservators might otherwise have taken was prevented, not only by a shortage of manpower but also the taking over of large parts of the Commons for use by the Army and Home Guard.

As early as 1938, some of the town's first air raid shelters appeared in the form of open trenches on Tunbridge Wells Common, while in October 1939 the Town Council was authorised to convert the caves under St Helena Cottage into more permanent shelters. By December 1940 there were already four bomb craters on the two Commons, including one in the middle of the Higher Cricket Ground. In 1941 large scale clearance of gorse bushes and other vegetation was undertaken in order to avoid the risk of fires caused by incendiary bombs. Such fires, it was thought, would not only endanger houses on and around the Commons, but would also "serve as a beacon lighting up the town for a further enemy attack". This removal of

ground flora would undoubtedly have accelerated the process of scrub growth.

In 1942 further works were carried out. A reinforced concrete shelter was constructed by Brighton Lake, and the National Fire Service constructed three steel tanks on concrete bases, two on Tunbridge Wells and one on Rusthall Common, each holding 23,000 gallons of water. In the same year, the railings around the two cricket grounds were removed for the war effort. By this time, several pieces of land on both Commons had been requisitioned by the military for purposes which included the siting of anti-aircraft guns and searchlight emplacements. The Conservators complained vigorously about the hazards caused by the widespread presence of entrenchments and

*anti-aircraft guns
and shelters*

other concealed excavations, especially when a local resident was injured by falling into an unprotected gun pit.

In 1944 the advent of the V1's or flying bombs brought about an increase in anti-aircraft operations on the Commons. A contemporary describes how by night one would see "the distant spark of the rapidly approaching flying bomb growing larger and larger till it passed overhead with a shattering roar, surrounded with a ghostly greenish glow and spitting white flames from its tail, the long streams of red Bofors tracer shells curving gracefully and apparently lazily upwards to their target, then the sharp golden bursts of three-point-sevens spangling the dark sky, and the slender white beams of searchlights directing a wing-lit night-fighter into action". I.B.

Friends Alfresco



Despite an all too typical English summer's evening (yes, of course it rained!) the annual Friends' Barbeque was acclaimed by all one hundred guests to have been a huge and friendly success. The event was held in the gardens of Ephraim Lodge by kind permission of Glyn and John Douch which provided a spectacular setting and the excellent food produced by Elaine and Mark Dennison, Phil, Phyl and Simon Cook, Gerry Brown and Peter Freeman together with the ever open bar cheerfully manned by Jane and Peter Hoole all made for a memorable evening. All in all, a very relaxed and enjoyable, if at times damp, gathering highlighted by a witty welcoming speech from the Chairman. The net result was a profit of £93 towards the Friends of The Commons Funds.

The picture above shows Mark Dennison and his fellow 'Firemen' looking dangerously competent at their job!

THE RUSTHALL MEMORIAL FOUNTAIN

In St Paul's Church, Rusthall, there is an inscription to the Memory of Margaret Cunliffe - which reads: "She hath done what she could. She hath been a succourer of many"

It is this helpful lady who appears to have inspired the memorial fountain at Rusthall.

The first mention of this fountain is made in Local Board Minutes of 5 May 1886 which note a request by Roger Cunliffe of Stoneley, Nevill Park, to erect a fountain in memory of "a member of my family".

At a meeting on 30 August 1886 the Freehold Tenants of Rusthall Manor gave their permission, subject to approval of the Lord of the Manor. A Waterworks Committee meeting Minute on 29 April 1887 relates to the supply of water to the fountain implying that it had been built by that date.

It is pleasant to think that the good lady continues, even after her death, to "succour" many thirsty people and animals.

Commons Exhibition Private Preview

On 14 June over 100 Friends and their guests attended a private viewing in Tunbridge Wells Museum of an exhibition of paintings, drawings, photographs, prints and etchings depicting the history of evolution of both Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons from the early 18th Century to the present day.

The exhibition, splendidly mounted by curator Michael Rowlands and Ian Beavis (his assistant and a member of our committee), provided an excellent chronological display - one of the most striking features of which was to make one realise

how open the Commons were in their original form and how wooded they have become over the intervening years.

The later illustrations showed the results, particularly over more recent years, of the efforts made to clear some areas and yet to maintain (and indeed plant) trees to screen tranquil parts from modern traffic intrusion.

The Chairman and Curator welcomed Friends and their guests - wine and snacks being provided by Committee Members and generous helpers.

OUR BARTENDERS

Jane and Peter Hoole have now run at least 6 bars for the Friends - at AGM's, at the barbeque, at the Museum Exhibition and so on. They have, in so doing, raised £100's for the Commons. Here they are, looking very happy as ever, despite all the hard work that the running of these bars entail. They say they have now retired. We must hope not - but if they have, is there anyone or two of you out there who would like to take over?



Flowers of the Commons

by Mary Page

with illustrations by Harold Page

Weatherwise this has been an unusual year so far. A cold dry winter followed by a very cold spring with little rain, but in spite of this, the flowers of the Common have produced a splendid show of colour and quantity. Did you see the Horse Chestnut trees along the Eridge Road in May? They had so many 'candles' on them it was impossible to see the branches. The HORSE CHESTNUT *Aesculus hippocastanum* although not a native, was



COMMON WORSE-CHESTNUT
Aesculus hippocastanum

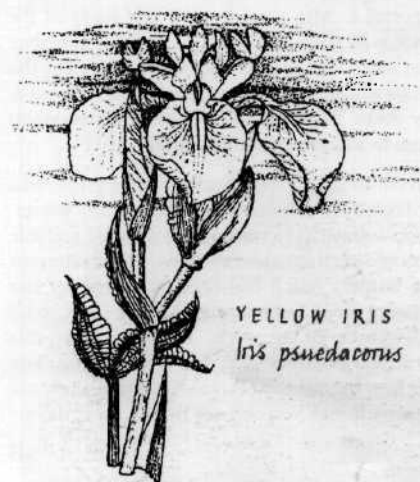
introduced into this country in the 17th Century and is one of the best known of our trees. It not only produces magnificent flowers, but has very sticky buds in early spring and the leaf scars on the twigs resemble a horseshoe complete with nail holes. Its well known fruit is the 'conker', a favourite with the children, and its leaves turn a beautiful gold in autumn.

But why HORSE? Various suggestions have been made including —

- (1) The Spaniards fed the conkers to their horses
- (2) From the old idea that the conker cured horses and cattle of the cough.
- (3) The name comes from the horseshoe sign of the leaf scar.
- (4) Horse just means coarse or inferior compared with the edible Sweet Chestnut!

So take your choice!

Still on the Eridge Road side of the Common at one end of Brighton Lake, the YELLOW IRIS *Iris pseudacorus* bloomed in splendour.

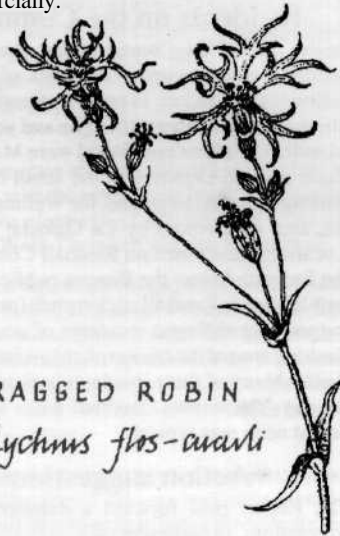


YELLOW IRIS
Iris pseudacorus

In Greek his means rainbow and in Greek mythology Iris was the messenger of June and she left a trail of brilliant colours across the sky whenever she went on her errands for the Gods.

Some think that the Iris is the original fleur de lys of France. The tradition is that in the 6th Century Clovis, the son of Charlemagne, was trapped with his army by the Goths on a bend of the River Rhine. As well as a good soldier, Clovis was also quite a good botanist and when he looked for a way of escape, he noticed a clump of yellow Iris growing out in the middle of the river, and, knowing that the plant only grew in shallow water, he was able to lead his army to safety and took the yellow Iris to be his badge. Centuries later during the Crusades Louis VII of France decided it would be his emblem so it became known as the Fleur de Louis which later became corrupted to Fleur de Lys.

On a more practical note the rhizomes produced a black ink or dye and in the 18th Century one doctor roasted the seeds and maintained that they made a drink similar to coffee but somehow it didn't take off commercially.



RAGGED ROBIN
Lychnis flos-cuculi

Another plant that has flourished this year is RAGGED ROBIN *Lychnis flos-cuculi* which was growing profusely by the side of a small stream at the south end of Tunbridge Wells Common. In 1963 I recorded it growing there but did not see it again until 1993, 30 years later I found it again thanks to the clearing of bracken and brambles by the Common Ground workforce and this year it has greatly increased. Gerard knew it as Wild Williams presumably to tell it apart from the Sweet Williams of Tudor gardens. He also said "although the flowers were finely and curiously snipped at the edges, they were not used either in medicine or nourishment, but only served for garlands and crowns to deck up gardens".

Editors Note: Sadly, since Mary Page wrote her article, Steve Budden's contractors have decapitated the Ragged Robin in opening up the vista around the south end of the Common. It must be hoped that it will return next year and not take another 30 years. Steve, we understand, has spoken to the contractors about this and also about the loss of a dog rose (ROSA MULTIFLORA) when clearing at the top end of Mayor York's Road.

I have often recorded Foxglove on the Common growing singly or in pairs but this year there was a wonderful stand of them on the rocks below Gibraltar Cottage. The FOXGLOVE *Digitalis purpurea* has nearly a hundred country names and

they range from Witches' Thimbles to Dragon's Mouth and from Snappjacks to Snoxums. All parts of the plant are poisonous but as you know it is still used medicinally in the treatment of heart disorders. It was a Dr Withering of Warwick who discovered its herbal value in the 18th Century by watching its curative effects on the dropsical patient of an old wise woman. He experimented with it and wrote a treatise on it and in time it appeared in the British Pharmacopoeia.

These are a few of the grand display of flowers on the Commons this year. I wonder what next season will be like?



FOXGLOVE
Digitalis purpurea

Mary Page

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Congratulations on the Spring 1996 Issue 12 of *Common Ground* which provided a "good read". Of particular interest was the way part 5 of the *History of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons* and the large scale planting of trees at the turn of the century related to the present day problems of unchecked growth described by NH in "Management to Conserve".

However, I would like to point out that the growth on the Common did not go unchecked during the last fifty years. From 1958 - 1973 Mr H G Tucker, Deputy Borough Surveyor, acted as Surveyor to the Commons Conservators and under his direction a sector of Common was cleared each year, on a three or four year rotation, and all the paths, including the gravel ones, were kept to their original width.

It was not until after his retirement that the rot set in. We all know how quickly our own gardens can become a jungle and in a very few years the Commons had lost their former glory and were in need of restoration. Thanks to the Freehold Tenants and the Friends' initiatives and the appointment of Steve Budden, progress has started but there is a long way to go and I wish the Tenants luck as they occupy the Chair of Conservators this year. Can they conjure up more money, the Lottery perhaps, and clear larger areas of scrub than has been possible to date?

Yours sincerely
Ann Revell, Bredbury Cottage, Bishops Down Park Road, Tunbridge Wells

SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL

Subscriptions were due from September 1st. Would members not on direct debit please despatch their very modest fee (£5 per individual, £10 per family) to David Wakefield, 68 London Road, Tunbridge Wells. Cheques to be made out to the Friends of the Commons, please.

Please also take this opportunity to encourage friends and neighbours to join. The bigger our membership, the greater our influence.

Covenant forms available from David Wakefield for those who wish to covenant.

SAFETY ON THE COMMONS

by June Bridgeman, **President**, Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District

As we wheeled my granddaughter's push chair along a wooded path below the Wellington Rocks, my daughter remarked "This is where the flashers used to hang around when we were children". The words had hardly left her lips when a middle-aged man, raincoat clutched around him, fled into the undergrowth at the sight of the advancing phalanx of mature womanhood. Plus ça change.

It is not unexpected that the local Commons and our leafier public parks should attract flashers and worse. This is one reason why many parents are reluctant to let their children play there on their own, and some women will not walk there even in broad daylight. Just how real are their fears?

A little light has been shed on this by a survey* recently carried out by Tunbridge Wells Soroptimist Club. Previous surveys of women's views about the town had highlighted how many felt unsafe in badly-lit or deserted streets, and indeed the extent to which they curtailed their activities outside the home, particularly in the evening, because of fears about personal safety. But there appeared to be little hard information and only a low priority attached to the topic. A "Crime Audit" by the Borough Council earlier this year barely mentioned women's experience or perceptions of crime in the town. One problem was that responsibility was fragmented across a wide range of different organisations dealing with different aspects of perpetrators, victims and locations, including the Police, Borough Council, parks supervisors, private security guards, schools, BR, and of course the Commons Conservators.

What we found out

The responses showed there was massive under-reporting of incidents where women and girls had felt afraid or been actually threatened. This was because many people thought complaints would not be taken seriously - and indeed some had their expectations confirmed. Other reasons were embarrassment, shock and a desire to blank the incident out. Unfortunately that same under-reporting leads to women's fears being dismissed too lightly, and little attention being paid to the effects of strategies that women and girls feel

obliged to adopt to "avoid unpleasantness" and how this impinges on their quality of life.

Three main problems were highlighted

- individual males behaving in a sexually threatening way. Incidents on the Commons and in the parks figured significantly.
- large groups of youngsters jostling, threatening or following at any time of the day, but particularly around pub closing time. This was mainly in the Pantiles, High Street and shopping precinct.
- general feelings of anxiety among girls and women about walking alone in some areas.

Examination of police reports on file showed that although close attention was paid to logging details of perpetrators, mapping where incidents occurred was much less exact. Little was recorded on precise location, sightlines, lighting and other contributory features.

Incidents on the Commons

In the case of the Commons, the questionnaires returned to us reported incidents of accosting, following, indecent exposure, hanging around children, threatening with a gun and actual sexual assault. Locations mentioned were Major York's Road and the Common to the south of it, a path leading from the fairground, the Wellington Rocks, the area overlooked by La Galoche Wine Bar. Locations mentioned on Rusthall Common were the footpath below the Beacon public house, the path leading to Rusthall cricket pitch (police reports logged four different incidents of accosting and flashing around the cricket pitch) and around Toad Rock. Many of these incidents took place during the day - the woman "flashed" when walking her dog at noon was typical.

Action suggestions

The Report puts forward a number of action suggestions, in particular —

- proper collection, precise mapping and analysis of information on offensive sexual and "mob" behaviour.
- shared data and strategies across different services and administrative areas.

- physical measures such as clearing foliage and improving lighting in identified trouble spots such as hospital car parks, taxi ranks, station approaches and individual roads.
- preventive strategies including CCTV surveillance, targeting of alcohol-related aggression, alternative activities for young people and behavioural education.

So what happens next?

Meetings are being held with the police and Borough Councillors to follow these up and copies of the report have been sent for comments to other organisations identified as being involved. Clearly the Commons Conservators come in this category, and we hope our report will give them some food for thought.

In particular, they would appear to have a shared interest in getting more accurate information about both the perpetrators and the locations of the incidents that occur. That raises several issues. How to get people to report incidents. How to get them logged and the precise locations examined to see if they can be made less vulnerable. How to share information with other "guardians" since in the case of sexual offences, it is likely that most of these are committed by a handful of perpetrators. We hope that the Conservators will join with the police and the Borough Council in addressing these questions especially because the Commons are one of the features that create the charm of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall, for most people most of the time, there is little risk that they will be molested. And yet there is this minority of incidents that not only are distressing and harmful in themselves, but which create the fears and anxiety that inhibit people's freedom of choice.

A limitation perhaps best summed up by the woman who said "I don't know what the fuss is about. I never have any trouble". And then she added "Of course, I have stopped walking my dog there in the mornings".

*Interim Findings of the Women's Safety in Travel Survey, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Area: Report by Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells, June 1996.

Warden's Report Summer 1996

Much of my time this summer has been taken up with preparing a revision of the Conservators management plan. The original KTNC plan, adopted in 1992, is still being followed but this only gives a broad vision of the future. The purpose of the present review has been to prepare detailed plans for the next five years. Much help in the process has come from the Freehold Tenants Committee and the draft document now goes before the Conservators. Once this has been amended and adopted, it may prove of interest to publish the proposals in the next issue of Common Ground.

Although this summer has not been unusually dry the Commons' ponds have suffered. Both Bracken Cottage pond and the Marlpit ponds started from very low levels this year and evaporation and leakage have made the situation worse. Marlpit pond is in the worst condition, the very dry summer of last year caused the pond to fall very low and it seems that the clay liner cracked in the sun.

Consequently, this year the water level dropped very quickly once the feeder stream stopped flowing. I fear we have lost all this year's egg production by the amphibians as well as many dragonflies. Plans are going ahead to have the pond re-puddled and sealed this autumn and with some financial assistance from the Environmental Agency we hope to restore the second pond at the site at the same time.

On a happier note, Spring, although late in arriving this year, produced a good crop of wildflowers with an abundance in particular of violets. The areas being managed as 'hay-meadows' had increased numbers of flowers, the area opposite Bretland Road on Rusthall Common was quite spectacular.

The recent cleared areas behind Fir Tree Car Park, adjacent to the racecourse and behind Brighton Lake have all continued to revert to grass at an encouraging rate and heather is rapidly colonising the racecourse clearance.

The seating around the Upper Cricket Ground was replaced with new 'hawthorn' benches as a memorial to Mrs Kentner, the late Lady of the Manor, which has much improved the appearance of the area. This project was partly funded by the Friends who generously donated £1500 toward it. Five more benches were placed on Rusthall Common as part of the memorial.

With Autumn fast approaching I have prepared a list of dates for volunteer tasks during this winter. As you will see it is a varied list with work suitable for people of all ages and abilities. During the past three winters much has been achieved by our volunteer group but it is still only the same small band who do all the work. Do come along this year if you possibly can, it is healthy, fun, you make new friends and above all it is free, there are not many things you can say that of these days.

SB