

# COMMON



# GROUND

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS  
AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 15. Spring 1997

## Suddenly it's Spring!

### Warden's Report by Steve Budden

Spring has now well and truly sprung with birds nesting, flowers blooming and frogs and newts returning to the ponds. Work on clearance and cutting has now stopped for the spring to allow all the inhabitants of the Commons some peace.

Although we welcome the wonderful warm start that we have had to the spring, this does mean that the risk of fire is a very much greater threat than normal. Contrary to popular opinion, the spring is a far greater fire risk period than high summer, particularly on heathland and grassland.

The new trees that have been planted this winter are now starting to come into leaf. Most are small transplants that have been used for screening against road noise, although it will clearly be some years before they become effective at their job. When planting these tree screens we are careful to use only native hedging species which have the advantages of providing food and shelter for wildlife plus being well suited to growing conditions in this country. They are also, usually, cheap. The newly planted hedge around the bottle bank on Rusthall Common (see picture below) is a good example



of this; it is comprised of about 50% hawthorn with around 10% each of holly, field maple, blackthorn, hazel and hornbeam with one or two dog roses thrown in for luck. Such a mixture, the traditional field hedge combination, is also very spiky and does a marvellous job of keeping intruders out of an area, be they animal or human.

In my last article for Common Ground I mentioned the restoration of the Marlpit ponds in Rusthall. These eventually filled with the one period of rain that we had this winter and I am pleased to report that all three species of newt have returned to the large pond this Spring. However, those of you who walk this area regularly will have noticed the sudden drop in water levels in the new small pond. It appears that we have a leak and more

work will have to be done by the contractors.

On Tunbridge Wells Common the grassland/heather area adjacent to the racecourse between Hungershall Park and Major Yorks Road has been extended with fallen trees and the choking layer of bracken removed. I hope that this will respond as well as the original area which seems to have an increasing population of lizards and, I am pleased to note, adders.

The volunteers have kept up their good work with two very productive days at Denny Bottom clearing holly and scrub from the rock outcrops; this has made a tremendous difference to the area, opening up several views. They also undertook extensive coppicing of gorse on Tunbridge Wells Common. This task is vital, although painful sometimes, as much of the gorse on the Commons is reaching over-maturity and will die unless cut back. It is pleasing to see how well the gorse coppiced over the last two years has regenerated, providing excellent nest sites and beautifying the Common with an abundance of flowers.

On a similar theme, much of the hawthorn on the Common is reaching over-maturity and an extensive programme of coppicing will be needed over the next ten years. Again, if it is not cut, much of this hawthorn will die and the range of ages and sizes that will be produced by a coppicing programme will be of great benefit to many birds.

As well as the 'traffic screens' mentioned earlier, there has also been some commemorative planting this winter. Many of you will have noticed newly planted trees with metal guards around them behind Fir Tree car park. The three lime trees planted in a group have been donated by the National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux, as has the seat that will be installed there. These Limes will grow to form a 'bower' around the bench, a style of planting traditional to the Commons. The other guarded tree in the middle of the triangle behind the car park is a Beech donated by Mrs Hack from Devon in memory of her mother. This tree should eventually dominate this area. My thanks also to Mr & Mrs Galbally of Heathfield for the new Hawthorne bench donated for Rusthall Cricket Pitch.

Finally I would mention our new litter contract which commenced at the start of January. The specifications have been upgraded and the contract was won by Bridgland Ltd who also cut the grass. I hope that you, like me, have noticed an immediate improvement and I hope that this will continue into the more difficult summer period.

### The Sixth A.G.M.

The Sixth Annual General Meeting of the Friends was held at the Town Hall on the evening of Wednesday March 12th when some 50 members attended. Considering we were competing with Monteverdi's Orfeo at the Assembly Hall and with a protest meeting at Rusthall about the fire-station cuts, this was not a bad turn-out. They were undoubtedly attracted by Steve Budden's annual talk (with slides) illustrating what steady improvements he is achieving across the Commons - the Marlpit ponds and steps, the exposure of the great range of the Cheese Ring Rocks, the return of much heather, the award of a new and tighter litter contract (to name but a few). The Chairman reported on other developments and events during the year and still to come (e.g. Diversions) and the Treasurer reported a healthy balance of £4,000 plus.

Some of this will go to the quinquennial trees reported below. The rest is being husbanded pro tem to support Diversions' pump priming. Roger Joye, our Hon Auditor, explained the need following the Charities Act 1993 to slightly amend our Rules regarding audit and this was duly passed. The Officers and Committee were re-elected (it would be good to see new faces offering themselves for election - perhaps next year?).

Finally, another tribute must be paid to Peter Hoole for once again running the bar before the meeting. We made a small profit for the Commons.

### THE QUINQUENNIAL TREES

To celebrate the first 5 years of the 'Friends' life 5 Scots pines have been planted at the top of the triangle bounded by Mt Ephraim, Church Road and Castle Road. Another one has been planted at the corner of Langton Road and Rusthall Road where there used to be one before the hurricane. Few of us will see these trees grow to their full height (80'), but they should be a great sight in years to come.

We hope to have a picture of the trees 'in situ' in our next issue. Ed.

### "Friends"

The idea of Friends is catching on. Our members, Peter and Maureen Reynolds, have started the Friends of Dunorlan Park and John Cullen, another of our members and the proprietor of the Beacon Hotel, has started the Friends of Happy Valley. Both are applying, directly or, indirectly, for Lottery funds. Anyone interested in joining should telephone Peter on 526016 and John on 524252.

# REJOICING AND RESTORATION

THE HISTORY OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS — PART 7 by Ian Beavis

Military activity on the Commons during World War II, combined with the contemporary loss of grazing, caused lasting disruption to their management. Although the military authorities paid compensation for actual damage, and it was reported that almost all damage had been made good by 1946, general neglect leading to uncontrolled growth of vegetation did not prove so easy to reverse. The absence of sheep and cattle left the task of keeping back scrub and bracken to human activity alone, but labour to perform the necessary work was in short supply. The desirability of reintroducing grazing was debated by the Conservators in the late 1940s, but clearly no way of achieving this could be found. In 1947, the occupant of the cottage at Bull's Hollow complained to the Conservators that "seedlings had grown into trees and her premises were now enclosed in a triangle of bracken, trees and weeds" only to be told that "owing to shortage of labour it had not been possible to effect the clearance of undergrowth". In the following year, the Freehold Tenants made more general observations on "the present unsatisfactory state of the Commons", but received a similar answer.

On the day of the present Queen's Coronation in 1953, Tunbridge Wells Common fulfilled its traditional role as a scene for local celebrations. These were centred on the Higher Cricket Ground, where "a great crowd assembled for the fancy dress parade, to hear the Queen's message broadcast, to see a firework display and the bonfire lit, and to take part in community singing". There was also, as on previous royal occasions, a tree planting ceremony, in this case involving

two flowering cherries placed by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor on either side of the cricket pavilion. The local press described how "The broadcast of the Queen's message was the signal for a movement of the people towards the loud-speaker van, and in silence they heard Her Majesty speak to them over the radio. Community singing, which could be heard all over the town and which included all the well-known tunes, was succeeded by the lighting of the bonfire".

## Coronation celebrations

Meanwhile, the Conservators were fighting what seemed to be a losing battle against rampant saplings and bracken. In the mid 1950s we find them discussing the fact that "sycamore and silver birch trees were becoming too prolific" and instructing the Surveyor "to report as to the action which may be taken to restrict the spread of bracken". However, as memory of the Commons' original condition faded, it became increasingly difficult to formulate a coherent policy or define a vision of what the Commons should really look like.

In 1957, H G Tucker, the Surveyor, carried out a detailed survey of the two Commons and offered proposals for their restoration. But these now took for granted that the Commons consisted largely of woodland, and failed to address the question of vanished heath and grassland. The results were contradictory. Some saplings of unwanted species were eliminated, but at the same time 269 fresh saplings, mainly oak, were planted. The Race Course was cleared, and there was much talk about removal of undergrowth. But

what this consisted of was no more than a "policy of clearing undergrowth and small defective trees alongside roads and footpaths". The possibility of grazing by goats was actively considered, while an active policy of exterminating rabbits was pursued. No one realised that rabbits helped to maintain open grassland.

By the 1960s management of the Commons had clearly become a holding operation, designed simply to stabilise what was perceived to be their natural condition. Radical intervention was not considered. This situation was epitomised by the saga of the Happy Valley viewpoint, which was under discussion throughout the decade. When it was first reported in 1961 that the view so much admired by the Victorians and Edwardians was now invisible due to obscuring vegetation, the Surveyor proceeded to order the removal of "dead and dying holly trees and relatively small and poorly shaped oak trees". The same type of work was carried out in 1967, but by the following year residents of Rusthall were still complaining that the view could not be seen. Two years later, similar arguments began over the condition of Toad Rock.

## disappearing views

In the early 1970s, natural processes caused a significant change in the appearance of the Commons, when large numbers of trees succumbed to Dutch elm disease, including part of Victoria Grove. But the effect of this did not compare with the impact of that memorable natural disaster the Great Storm of 1987.



## Kent High Weald Project Participation on the Commons Restoration Work

As part of the ongoing restoration of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons, the Kent High Weald Project joined forces with the Tunbridge Wells Common Volunteers to conserve the sand rock habitat at Toad Rock in February.

Under the guidance of Steve Budden, Commons Warden, a large group cleared vegetation from

outlying rocks, including these youngsters who are undertaking the Duke of Edinburgh Award from local schools.

For further information on how to become involved as a conservation volunteer contact:

The Kent High Weald Project Council Offices High Street Cranbrook Kent TN17 3EL (01580)712771	Steve Budden Commons Warden Town Hall Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN11 1RS (01892)526121
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## FRIENDS ANNUAL DINNER

The Annual Dinner was held in the Spa Hotel (one of our Corporate members) on Friday 31st January. 79 members and guests attended. Lord Griffiths of Govilon, retired Lord of Appeal, spoke - entertainingly and learnedly. He rehearsed 2 Commons cases which had come before the House of Lords in recent years - with the rights of the Commons being upheld by their Lordships. He also spoke, more controversially, of the dispute between the Home Secretary and the Higher Judiciary over sentencing. His views were generally supported, though not by all.

A raffle was held for Commons funds and £135 was raised. Altogether a successful evening.

## The Parson's Nose



This grand rock, pictured here by Doug Brooks, was under threat from the Fire Brigade who maintained they could not get modern equipment through the narrow opening into Rustwick. However, a reprieve has now been granted - hopefully for all time, especially as this is part of the SSSI.

# Flowers of the Common — Rusthall that is

by Mary Page with illustrations by Harold Page

On looking back over my notes on the Commons I find that I seem to have written a lot about Tunbridge Wells Common and not so much on Rusthall, although in many cases the plants are found on both, so I thought this time I would concentrate on Rusthall Common and describe four plants there that do not grow on Tunbridge Wells Common.

The first one is a member of the Lily family *Allium triquetrum*, **TRIQUETROUS LEEK** or **THREE CORNERED GARLIC** and from those names you may gather it is a member of the onion genus. At a distance it can be mistaken for a



**THREE CORNERED GARLIC**  
*Allium triquetrum*

white bluebell, but on looking closer you can see the difference. Its drooping white bells have a bright green line down the centre of each petal, its stem is not round but three-sided, which gives its name, and it has a very oniony smell. A native of the Western Mediterranean it was introduced into Britain in 1752 and by 1860 had escaped into the wild in the SW of the country. In the Scilly Isle it is a pernicious weed which grows everywhere. According to recent records it is still spreading eastwards although it remains quite a rarity. I have known it on Rusthall Common for nearly ten years.

Another plant growing on the edge of the Common is *Chelidonium majus* **GREATER CELANDINE**, a bushy perennial with greyish-green toothed leaves, a stem containing an orange juice and a bright yellow flower with four petals. It is no relation to the lesser Celandine belongs to the Poppy family. There is some doubt why it is called Chelidonium which in Greek means swallow. One theory is that the flowers start to bloom when the swallows arrive in May and continue

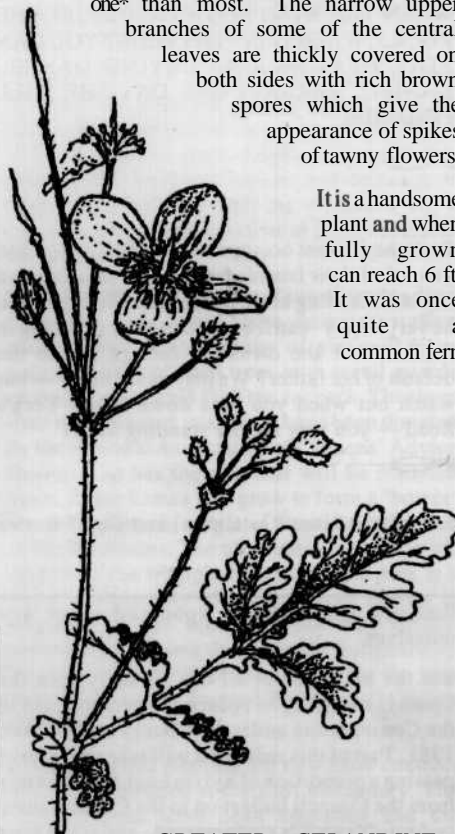
until they depart in the Autumn. Another reason given is that the swallows were seen to give the sticky orange juice to their nestling as a cure for blindness. Whichever is the right answer Greater Celandine has been used as an eye lotion as far back as Anglo-Saxon times and it is always found growing near human habitation. In America it is known as Swallowwort.

There is another member of the Lily family to be found on Rusthall Common. *Polygonatum multiflorum*, **SOLOMON'S SEAL**. It is an unusual looking plant with its area of green leaves and clusters of elegant bell flowers hanging down.

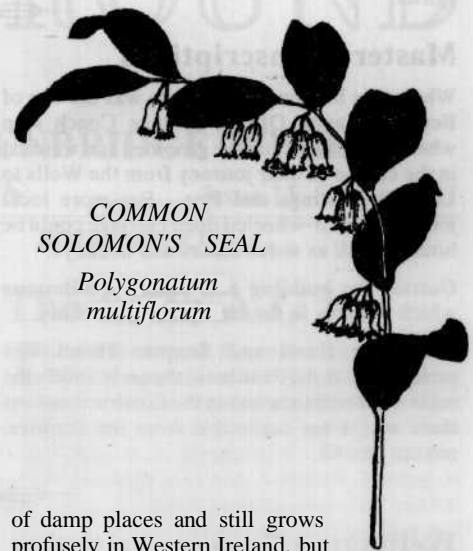
It is often found in gardens but the species on the Common is a native wild flower. Like the Greater Celandine the name of Solomon's Seal has caused much argument. Some say it refers to the flat round scars on the roots which are said to resemble a six pointed star known as Solomon's Seal in the Middle East. Others, that the way the flowers hang down is similar to how a seal hangs from a document. Perhaps the most reasonable explanation is that the plant was used by the old herbalists to seal or glue together broken bones. Gerard the 16th century herbalist thought a lot of Solomon's Seal especially for mending limbs when the root was either taken in ale or used as a poultice. He also recommended the application of the fresh root because, to quote, "it taketh away in one night or two at the most, any bruise, blacke or blew spots gotten by fals or womans wilfulness in stumbling on their haste husbands fists or suchlike".

Lastly *Osmunda regalis* **ROYAL FERN**, the best known of Rusthall's rarities. No fern is a flowering plant being propagated by spores and not seeds, but Royal Fern looks more like one\* than most. The narrow upper branches of some of the central leaves are thickly covered on both sides with rich brown spores which give the appearance of spikes of tawny flowers.

It is a handsome plant and when fully grown can reach 6 ft. It was once quite a common fern



**GREATER CELANDINE**  
*Chelidonium majus*



**COMMON SOLOMON'S SEAL**  
*Polygonatum multiflorum*

of damp places and still grows profusely in Western Ireland, but is rare over most of England. It suffered greatly from the Victorian craze of fern collecting and places where once it was common now it is no more so we are very fortunate to still have it with us.

Mary Page

**ROYAL FERN**  
*Osmunda regalis*



**Editors Note:** I have seen the Three Cornered Garlic growing in profusion along the coastal paths in Guernsey where it is so vigorous it has to be periodically culled in order to prevent it smothering the other more delicate flora.

## REMINDER

### Litter Pick

Sunday, 27th April at 10 a.m.

Fir Tree Car Park  
or

Rusthall Bottle Bank.

# GHOST ENCOUNTERS—of the Commons Kind

Tunbridge Wells Common and its environs have a generous share of stories and recollections of encounters with the supernatural. Printed below is a selection which we trust will raise your spirits.

## Master Transcriptions

Where this building now stands was the site of **Bennets Wagon Office**, a Stage Coach stop where the horses could be groomed and watered in the course of their journey from the Wells to London, Hastings and Rye. For more local journeys a four-wheeled open carriage could be hired as well as sedan chairs and donkeys.

Outside the building still stands a milestone which features in the later part of our story.

When the Hand and Sceptre Hotel was established on the Pantiles in the early 1800's the main hotel entrance was in the London Road but there was a bar accessible from the Pantiles, next to No. 48.

## Wellington Rocks

Although it was difficult for them to meet during lunch time as the period allowed for refreshments was very limited Elaine and Daniel made a point of meeting after work at the Wellington Rocks on the Common.

Daniel worked at Durrants 7 The Pantiles as a shop assistant.

It was 1917 and Daniel knew that sooner or later he would be called up for service with the Army and every meeting at Wellington Rocks was very precious.

When he was at last called up he was soon posted to the trenches in France but he regularly corresponded with Elaine. He promised that as soon as he returned on leave he would meet Elaine once again. When finally Elaine received a letter telling her that Daniel was coming home and would meet her at their favourite place, Wellington Rocks, she was overjoyed.

On the appointed day and after work had

The Wagon office then became the stables for the Hand and Sceptre Hotel and here the horses of the guests were groomed and stabled.

Daniella Bayfield who owns Master Transcriptions has seen the figure of a girl sitting on the milestone outside her building. The girl is dressed in plain Georgian costume, she is young and looks very determined and this figure has been witnessed by another visitor to the building.

She seems to be so much a part of the scene that we wonder if the girl is waiting perhaps for her boyfriend or is she waiting for the coach from London? We may never know but the girl is an intriguing figure.

finished Elaine hastened to Wellington Rocks but although she waited for a long time Daniel did not turn up.

Disappointed and hurt Elaine went home to find a message awaiting her from Daniel's mother. Hastening to see her she was shown a telegram the mother had received telling her that Daniel had been killed in action in France.

Overwrought, Elaine rushed out of the house, there was a strong wind blowing and it was raining.

Wellington Rocks was nearly deserted because of the weather but an observer saw Elaine climb to the top of a rock and with a cry of Daniel, Daniel, she fell off the rock and broke her neck.

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS AMONGST THE ROCKS, WHEN IT IS VERY QUIET YOU CAN STILL HEAR ELAINE CRYING DANIEL, DANIEL. PERHAPS ONE DAY SHE WILL FIND HIM.

## York Cottage

York Cottage is situated just across the road from the Pantiles and was built on the Common by the Lady of the Manor in 1830. She employed George Mercer as her chaise driver and gave him permission to build the house providing other Commoners did not object. George Mercer unfortunately went into debt in 1834 and the house passed to his daughter.

Both the present occupants of York Cottage and several of their friends have seen a lady dressed in black standing at the front gate. She appears to be very happy - can it be the daughter rejoicing in the fact that she owns the cottage due to the default of her father? We may never know — but watch out when you pass down Major York's Road — you may see her standing there!

Reproduced by kind permission of Pantiles traders John Bath (Binns Restaurant) and Geoff Butler (G & B Butler, Lapidarists).

## THE CONSERVATORS FINANCES

These are in a very healthy state at the moment. Whereas the budget for 1996/7 originally showed an excess of expenditure over income of £6390 the projection for the year (made at the end of February) showed a surplus of income over expenditure of £5513. There have been a number of reasons for this - good management, contributions from other sources such as the Environment Agency, Countryside Stewardship,

Forestry Commission woodland grant and ourselves.

But the net result of all this is, sadly, that the Council are going to reduce the precept paid to the Conservators under the County of Kent Act, 1981. Part of this reduction will take the form of passing a proportion of Sylvia Luckhurst's salary from the Council budget on to the Conservators' budget. Moreover we have said - and it has been accepted - that we will contribute £500 p.a. to the Conservators' finances in recognition of the invaluable help Sylvia gives to the Friends as our Secretary.

# The Bicentenary Diversions



Our plans for Saturday 16th August make steady progress. The Leisure Board of the Council have very generously given us a grant of £3000 to help mount the occasion and the Freehold Tenants have, again very generously, agreed to underwrite our expenditure to the tune of a further £2500. Thomson, Snell and Passmore, one of our Corporate members have very generously agreed to pay half the cost of the firework display and The Wells Security Services, another Corporate member, have given a valuable donation as well as providing overnight security for tents, etc. Wolfit's (Peter Hoole) is sponsoring the terrier races. The Russell Hotel are donating substantial prizes and Sainsbury's have kindly come up with a £10 Homebase voucher. If any Friend knows of other likely sources of help we would be glad to hear as our money worries are not yet over. We face heavy outlay on marquees, tents, costumes, hire of donkeys, the remaining firework expenditure and insurance; and we need more prizes.

Other developments are that we have engaged Leterby and Christopher, the Glyndebourne (and other major events) caterers to run the refreshment tent all afternoon and the HogPounder's Feast in the evening. The ticket price for the Feast will be £12.50, half price for children, and/or a £3 goodie bag for smaller children. We shall be circularising members with ticket application forms in due course but meantime please BOOK THE DATE.

Other attractions will be Whitbread's Shire horses and dray (arriving in a 67' long horsebox 9' wide!) and Lloyds Bank Black Horse (by kind permission of Lloyds Bank). The ladies of Kent and Sussex have agreed to play the Stool-Ball match — in costume. The terriers are booked, as well as the donkeys and volunteers will be welcome for the smoking and jingling matches and for the running and wheelbarrow races.

Throughout the afternoon and evening there will be a need for race starters, judges, marshals, programme-sellers, and general crowd controllers. Would any Friend who is able to help please give their name to Sylvia Luckhurst.

