



Chairman's Report



Two Chairmen: David Wakefield (Friends of the Commons) and Geoff Butler (Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators)

The foot and mouth outbreak has made a major impact on both the Commons.

With the closure of virtually all open spaces around the Town, that is Southborough Common, Pembury Wood etc, our two Commons have become the only places where people can walk their dogs, and this has put a heavy burden on the Warden. And this on top of the worst winter weather for the past hundred years. The **Lower Cricket Ground** is under water! We are concerned that MAFF might at any moment decide to close the Commons.

In the light of this, we have decided that we cannot go ahead with **Frolics** this year, but will have to postpone it to another year.

Instead, we will hold the **Friends' Tea Party** on the same day, 21st July, at the Mount Edgcumbe, as last year.

We held the annual dinner at the Spa, where we were addressed

by Bob Ogle on the 'Great Storm'. This was a most successful talk. Next year we will have our own Ian Beavis to talk to us at the dinner on 'Flora and Fauna on the Commons'.

The **Tunbridge Wells Museum** held an exhibition in January which took as its theme, 'Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons: History, Natural History and Art', which did the commons proud. If you were unable to attend, the accompanying book is available from the Museum.

In the last issue of Common Ground, I mentioned the concern that changes could be made to the **Fairground Car Park**, at the bottom of Major York's Road. I am pleased to report that this appears to have died a death. But eternal vigilance is still our watchword.

Our working parties meet on the first Sunday of each winter

month at the Fir Tree Road carpark. The aim is to supply the Warden with a little extra resource. His objectives this coming winter are tree planting, scrub clearance and pond clearance. Dress is old clothes, stout footwear and bring something warm to drink. You can be assured of a feeling of satisfaction at the end of the day!

The Lower Cricket Ground played host to the Primary Cricket Festival 2000, with over 200 children playing on each and every weekday from 31 July through to 28 August. We hope to welcome them back again this year.

The Commons may be partially underwater and threatened by disease, but we are not downhearted. See you at the Friends Tea Party.

David Wakefield

Friends' Tea Party

21 July 2001

MOUNT EDGCUMBE
ON THE COMMON
Tickets £4.50
from Sylvia Luckhurst
01892 526121

Working Parties

**First Sunday from
October to March**

**10.00am
Fir Tree Road
car park**

MINUTES

Friends who were unable to get to the AGM, might like to see what matters were raised at the meeting.

The **Minute Book** is held by our Secretary, Mrs Sylvia Luckhurst, and she can be contacted on 01892 526121

FOR SALE

We still have the following items for sale:

Christmas Cards 0.25p each

Maps of Tunbridge Wells Common £1.50 each

Maps of Rusthall Common £1.50 each

Mugs £3.50 each

Jigsaw Puzzles £4.50 each

**from George Lawson
01892 524019**

The Mystery of the Missing Tortoiseshells

Readers may well have heard reports about the vanishing British sparrow. A year or so ago, ornithologists suddenly realised that the *House Sparrow*, traditionally one of the commonest of British birds, was not being seen as much as it used to be. Further investigation made it clear that sparrows were in fact in serious decline, and were disappearing from the urban landscape where they had been a familiar feature for centuries. Although various theories have been put forward for this unexpected turn of events, no definite explanation has yet been found.

Rather less publicised, but equally mysterious, has been the recent disappearance from town parks and gardens of that 'sparrow' of the butterfly world, the *Small Tortoiseshell*. This well-known bright orange butterfly has traditionally been one of the most common urban species. Hibernating conspicuously in sheds and outbuildings, and often trying to do so in houses, it has emerged in spring to sun itself with outspread wings on fences and walls, and all through spring and summer it has been a familiar sight at various cultivated flowers, especially Buddleia. That was the case until 1999, but then everything changed. In the Spring of that year, Tortoiseshells emerged from hibernation as usual, but as spring progressed into summer observers throughout the country began to notice that there were few to be seen. The Commons, where this butterfly is well established, were no exception. A few *Small Tortoiseshells* appeared on the Commons in the early spring of 2000, but once again there were none in the later part of the year. In fact, the only ones seen by me around Tunbridge Wells in summer were outside the urban area altogether, in places like Bayhall, east of Hawkenbury.

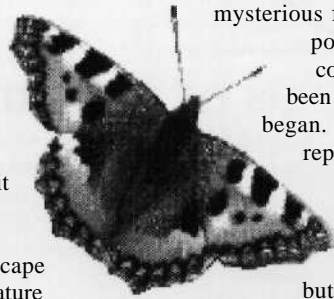
The reason for the sudden scarcity of a formerly abundant butterfly is far from clear, particularly as the *Peacock*, a related garden butterfly which also hibernates as an adult and has the same food plant (nettles) in its caterpillar stage, has been unaffected. Interestingly enough, the *Comma*, another adult hibernator with caterpillars feeding on nettles, has become more numerous in Tunbridge Wells (including the Commons) over the last two years. Usually a

predominantly woodland butterfly, the *Comma* seems to be

appearing more often in parks and gardens, almost as if taking over a niche left vacant by the *Small Tortoiseshell*.

But before we begin to speculate

about harmful climatic or environmental changes, we need to bear in mind that mysterious fluctuations in the populations of some common butterflies have been going on since records began. In 1908 the *Peacock* was reported to be 'gradually disappearing' from Kent, but in 1916 Edward Morgan's account of the butterflies of Tunbridge



Wells was able to report that 'this for many years was almost absent, but of late has again shown itself in some numbers'. It has been common ever since. Even stranger things have happened to the *Comma*. The caterpillars of the *Comma* used to be a well-known pest in the Kentish hop gardens, but in the 1830s it started to decline, finally disappearing from south-east England altogether and retreating to strongholds in the west. It did not come back to the Tunbridge Wells area until the 1930s. Meanwhile, its caterpillars had switched their favourite food plant from hops to nettles.

Another interesting case is that of the *Holly Blue*, one of the two species of blues currently found on the Commons, but easily distinguished at close quarters by its plain silvery white underside with small black specks (as opposed to the elaborate speckled pattern of the *Common Blue*). It is usually found flying around holly and ivy, its larval food plants, while the *Common Blue* frequents open grassland. The *Holly Blue* became scarce in the Tunbridge Wells area in late Victorian period, recovered by 1916, and then virtually disappeared in the 1970s. It suddenly reappeared in the spring of 1989 and by that summer had become widespread and numerous, with a large and conspicuous population on the Commons. After a couple of years, numbers dropped again, but a few are still to be seen each year on the Commons.

Most butterflies are quite predictable. We know what conditions they like, and we can successfully manage their habitats to encourage them to flourish. A few have populations that are much more volatile, and with these we should expect the unexpected. One to look out for is the *Wall Brown*, which makes itself conspicuous by sunning itself on the bare ground of footpaths and flying up from under the feet of walkers. This has been common locally in the past but has been in a period of retreat since the 1960s. Judging from its past history, it could return and become once again one of the Commons' familiar grassland species.

Ian Beavis



Saturday 21st July 2001

As we have done two previous Frolics you are aware of the major tasks which need to be undertaken. The headings of the sub-committee's minutes will give you a flavour of the work

- TENTAGE AND TABLETS
- PUBLICITY
- FINANCE
- ANIMALS
- CHILDREN'S GAMES AND RACES
- HISTORIC GAMES
- CATERING AND BAR
- FUNFAIR

We already have names set against several of these headings, but what we still lack are names for

RAFFLE

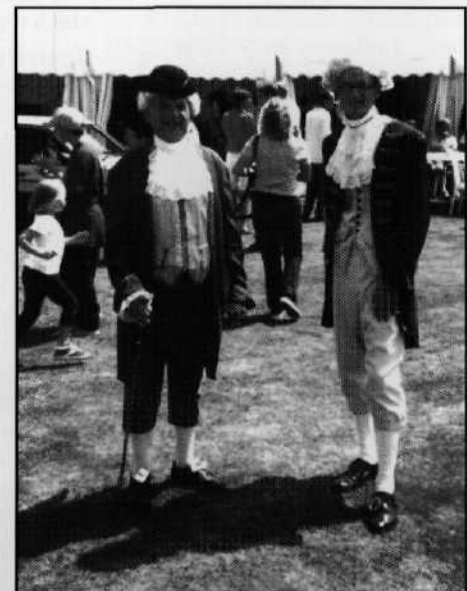
(that is getting raffle tickets sold on the days leading up to Frolics)

SPONSORSHIP

(raising finance from local businesses)

We badly need help on both these two fronts. Please contact me (TW 523983) if you feel that you can help.

David Wakefield



WARDEN'S REPORT

This has been the most difficult winter that we have had to cope with since we started work on the implementation of the management plan. The continuous heavy rain that we have experienced since last October has meant that we have not been able to bring any heavy machinery or equipment onto the Common and so we have been limited to only work that can be carried out by hand. This has of course, meant that we have postponed most of the winter's planned work. The proof that this is the correct and sensible policy was provided by Fibernet, a fibre-optic cable laying contractor who had been granted permission to cross the Common. Within the space of one day, Fibernet's workers caused appalling damage to the edges of most of the paths in the area between **Castle Road** and **London Road**. Many of you, no doubt, saw the damage and were as upset as I was. The damage will be repaired, and at Fibernet's expense, but there is no way of doing this until the ground has dried out. The way the wet weather is still hanging on, I can see this work not being undertaken till May or even June.

We have managed to carry out some works, we have cleared scrub and removed a number of large fallen trees to expose another of the old ponds on the Commons, this one between **Cabbage Stalk Lane** and the

path from the fairground car park to **Hungershall Park**. As soon as we are able to gain access with machinery we will grind out the stumps from the area and dredge out as much of the mass of rotting leaves that have filled the pond as we can. At the same time we have planted new trees on the steep slope above the pond in order to discourage the problems experienced in the area in the past with motor bikes using it as a scrambling circuit. A temporary fence has been installed at the top of the slope whilst the trees become established.

We have removed a number of old ivy-covered, decaying hawthorns from the edges of **Bishops Down Road**. This was done primarily on safety grounds but it as. I think, enhanced the area visually as well. We planted several hundred new trees in this area last year and the extra light reaching them now should help them become established more quickly. Similar clearance was carried out on the edges of the **Coach Road** on Rusthall Common. The volunteers have managed to stay in action all winter. They have, as usual, carried out many valuable tasks including tree planting, coppicing of gorse, and scrub clearance at Denny Bottom.

There will be a litter pick on both Commons on **Sunday 15th April**. We start at 10 am from Fir Tree Road car park on

Tunbridge Wells Common and from near the bottle bank at Common View on Rusthall. Do join us if you can.

At present, of course, the foot and mouth outbreak is dominating all our thoughts. Both Commons remain open at the time of writing this report and seem to be virtually the only piece of countryside locally to do so. This is, of course, causing a huge increase in the levels of visitors to the Commons especially dog-walkers. This in turn is leading to an increase in the problem that we associate with that activity. In response, I have temporarily doubled the level of dog-fouling patrols. The current thinking from MAFF is that we should stay open as long as possible to give people at least somewhere to walk and avoid then being tempted into the countryside. If however, an outbreak occurs in our immediate area, we will almost certainly be instructed to close the Commons: easier said than done! This terrible disease could be with us for some time to come and the Common will in consequence, only increase in importance. I suppose that we should try and find some kind of silver lining from this disaster and maybe it is that this situation will greatly raise the profile of our Commons, and may produce some more members for the Friends!

Steve Budden

GUIDED COMMONS WALKS

TWO guided walk this year, led by Dr Ian Beavis, will take place on

Saturday 16 June 2001

starting at 10.30 hrs on Rusthall Common, starting from Toad Rock

Saturday 28 July 2001

10.30 hrs

from Thackeray's House, Tunbridge Wells Common and, again, will also take about two hours.

A must for anyone interested in the flora and fauna of the Commons.

Spring Litter Pick

The Spring litter pick will take place on

Sunday 15 April at 10.00 hrs

There are two starting points:

- for those who want to clean up Tunbridge Wells Common, the Fir Tree car park;
- for those who are interested in Rusthall Common, meet outside the old Brahms and Liszt public house (now gone, but we all know where it was!).

If you are in any doubt as to where to go, then the Warden (01892 526121) will give you directions.

These litter picks are good not only for the Commons, but also for the waistline!



A Dip into the Manorial Archives

Among the vast archives of the Manor of Rusthall is much correspondence with people who have applied for use of part of the Common for their various activities. Circuses, fairs and political parties have been welcomed, provided they pay for the privilege, and undertake not to cause any damage. The local Suffragettes, for example, were allowed to bring a waggon onto the Common for a meeting in June 1914, agreeing 'to make good any damage that may be caused to the ground' and paying half a guinea to the agents, Messers Carter, Banks and Bennett.

However, there was one occasion when a political presence was not welcome. Leafing through the Agent's files for 1937, I was startled by the lightning-flash symbol (chilling to one of my generation) on a letter of 18 March from the **British Union of Fascists** and **National Socialists** – Mosley's Blackshirts. It was signed by Clement Bruning, who had the menacing title of 'Administrator, Meetings and Propaganda', and asked for permission to bring a van onto the Common as a rostrum for the speaker at a meeting to be held on Sunday, 21 March.

Mr Baird, the Lord of the Manor, categorically refused permission, but the meeting went ahead all the same, on the Lower Cricket Ground. Mr Baird asked for a report from the Common Ranger as to the extent of the damage. The latter wrote *7 regret that I was not present to prevent the occurrence, owing to feeling indisposed. The pitch is not seriously damaged, but ruts are apparent in some portion, owing to the sodden sate of the*

ground... Mr Baird was extremely angry at this flouting of his authority, and was all for going to law, as he had done many times in the past - but even he was discouraged when the **Manorial** solicitors felt that they could not put the damage at more than a shilling.

I felt sure that the local press would have full reports of the meeting, but to my surprise I could find nothing about it in the Courier - but then the town was in the turmoil of a Parliamentary election at the time. However,

when I mentioned the incident to **Marion Goulden** (nee **Pollock**) she told me that when she was a child, living in Lonsdale Gardens, she took the family dog for his daily walk along Church Road and across the Common. On that Sunday, however, she was forbidden to go further than Jordan House, in case any unpleasantness should occur at the Fascist meeting. She had to tell me, that being an obedient child, she had duly turned back, and so could not offer an eye-witness account of what exactly happened on that occasion.

Geoffrey Copus

