



COMMON GROUND NEWSLETTER

The Society founded for '... the conservation, maintenance, preservation and peaceful enjoyment for the benefit of the public of the Commons by such means as the Society in consultation with the Conservators for the Commons thinks fit'.

Registered Charity No. 1013975

Issue 40. Autumn 2006

Diary of Forthcoming Events

Work Parties

*Saturday 7th October,
2006*

*Saturday 4th November,
2006*

*Saturday 2nd December,
2006*

*Saturday 6th January,
2007*

*Saturday 3rd February,
2007*

*Saturday 3rd March,
2007*

Meet 10.00 am Fir Tree
Car Park

Annual Dinner

*Friday, 16th February,
2007*

at the Spa Hotel

Walks with Dr Ian Beavis

*Saturday, 12th May,
2007*

Meet at 10.00 am at
Toad Rock, Rusthall

*Saturday, 1st September,
2007*

Meet at 10.00 am at
Thackeray's House, London
Road, Tunbridge Wells.

From the Chairman

As I write, the rain is falling and the crane flies are invading - Autumn must be here! Some of the chestnut trees on the common look as if they have suffered in the hot weather this year. I just hope that they have not been infected with the virus that I heard about recently.

Spafest came and went amidst much noise. It was

the right decision to cancel the events on the Lower Cricket Ground and next time, I hope that common sense will prevail and consultation occur in good time for informed considered decisions to be taken.

The restoration of the railings has begun and the set below St Helena House look very good. We thank

Dave Sissions for his work and look forward to seeing the ones around the Chalybeate and the Cold Bath take place.

Please renew your memberships - the Commons still need to be protected and championed by all in Tunbridge Wells.

Jenny Blackburn

A short History of the Friends of the Common

By Peter Freeman (Founder member of Friends of The Commons and Freehold Tenant)

The Friends owe their existence to Patrick Shovelton's organising know-how, his energy and charm. All these, and three years' efforts - gathering a small group of us around him - culminated fifteen years ago in his persuading the Commons Conservators that 'Friends' could be useful - and, through a public meeting, in enrolling our first Members. Patrick's spark fell on dry tinder! Inaction after the 1987 storm had left the Commons in so sad a state that many who walked and loved them were more than ready, when called, to cry "present". This became clear at the very start, when the room assigned for that first meeting quickly overflowed!

Separately, and feeling just as strongly that the Commons required more active management, the Freehold Tenants (who provide four of the twelve Conservators), spear-headed by Nick Hill, had

persuaded their colleagues to commission a survey by the Kent Trust for Nature Conservancy and subsequently to engage a Warden.

So the Commons entered a new era, with the Friends playing their proper part. We are a pressure group, but a wholly constructive one, urging improvements in the Commons and providing funds - not for maintenance, which is the Conservators' responsibility, but for things like planting trees and better seats, which perhaps fall outside their budget. We recently helped finance a new survey by the Kent Wildlife Trust to examine progress over the first ten years and make suggestions for the next decade. Volunteers supplement the employed litter pickers by going into places they do not touch (I remember finding an old washbasin and some unmentionable things in a thicket!), while devoted

work groups help the Warden, Steve Budden, to make improvements during companionable mornings.

Subscriptions being for the Commons, another group of volunteers, which Gerry Brown set up in the early days to deliver notices, keeps Members in touch. And already three months after start-up the first number of Common Ground appeared, complete with a nice logo (changed later - why?) and a list of eight 'priority improve-ments'! The Friends have also offered - with the Conservators' permission and Steve Budden's hard work - two splendid events. "Diversions", two centuries after the festival it commemorated, was master minded by Patrick, who also coaxed fine prizes and a great fireworks display from business acquaintances, and "Frolics", a few years later, by David Wakefield. Great credit for all this is due to the Chairperson of

the time, his/her close lieutenants and the Committee - meeting (thanks to the Spa hotel) on Sunday evenings.

Looking back over those fifteen years and feeling nothing but praise for so much work and achievement, I do have some regrets:

- at our very modest successes (those mainly through Ian Beavis's initiatives) in interesting our schoolchildren - future citizens - in the Commons, so close at hand, as a rich source of nature studies;

- at the few young Members, possibly with new ideas;

- that we find it hard to extend our membership, even - just one example - among firms adjacent to the Commons, on behalf of staff who must surely enjoy its proximity;

- or really to convince our Council of the true value and importance of the Commons - so invaluable a 'lung' at the town's heart and so splendid a tourist attraction and leisure space. The Borough's contribution - most, though not all, mandated by statutory precept - does not seem generous compared with funds made available for comparable areas and other leisure/tourist activities.

Regrets, maybe - but the Friends are a power for good, so one last thought: if every Member tried hard to find just one other...? More Members lift our funds but above all in case of trouble their numbers increase our influence. For we must convince fellow citizens of everyone's great fortune in having the Commons, and be prepared on important matters to raise our voice.

Peter Freeman

Noteworthy Buildings Facing the Common

"Thackeray's", 85 London Road

As part of the celebrations to mark the 400th Anniversary of Tunbridge Wells, the Borough Council has produced a special Heritage Walking Trail. The Route links eleven plaques commemorating notable figures from history, having connections with Tunbridge Wells.

A leaflet* about the trail is available from the Tourist Information Centre on the Pantiles.

Five of the eleven plaques related to buildings facing the common, and my sketch shows the one to the left of the entrance porch at "Thackeray's", 85 London Road. Previously known as Rock Villa, the building is timber framed and dates from Stuart times. The land upon which it stands once formed part of the ancient Manor of South Frith, and the frontage of the property marks the former boundary between that Manor and the Manor of Rusthall.

The building's most illustrious occupant was the novelist Willam

Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863). Thackeray first came to Tunbridge Wells as a schoolboy, during the August vacation from Charterhouse in 1823. On that occasion he stayed with his mother and stepfather, at "a little house hard by the Common". This, he recalled some 40 years later, could be seen from the windows of Roack Villa where he stayed with his family in the summer of 1860. Here he wrote "Tunbridge Toys" for the Cornhill Magazine, of which he was editor. By that time his reputation had been well and truly established, particularly through the publication of "Vanity Fair" in 1846 - 8. "The Virginians", published in 1857 - 9, contains several chapters set in Tunbridge Wells, sometimes drawing upon Logan's well known print of "remarkable characters" on the Pantiles.

Thackeray's daughter, the novelist and woman of letters, Lady Ritchie, recalled the family's stay during 1860 in her edition of her father's works. Rock Villa she describes as "an old wooden house at the foot of Mount Ephraim". The drawing room windows, she said, looked across the garden towards the Common. "The Grandparents", she went on, "were living in the ground-floor sitting room; we were established overhead, with a couple of puppies, whose antics were the chief events of those peaceful days".

The present restaurant may not always seem quite as peaceful, but it does enable diners to see inside this interesting building. Internal features include a fine staircase that would no doubt have been familiar to the six foot three tall Thackeray, his two daughters and, of course, the two puppies that apparently provided such absorbing entertainment for this literary elite.

Philip Whitbourn

* leaflet enclosed with Newsletter



"Thackeray's" - Drawing by Philip Whitbourn

Annual Subscriptions

The annual subscriptions to the Friends of the Commons are now due. Please forward your subscription promptly. A pro forma letter with a tear-off payment slip will be enclosed with common Ground for all those members who pay by cheque/cash. If you have already paid your subscription by the time you receive this copy of Common Ground please ignore this notice.

WARDEN'S REPORT

Another Summer draws to an end. This one has been notable for some climatic extremes, starting with the late spring snow and then proceeding to the torrential rain of the last week in May, the searing heat of July and finishing with the coolest and dullest August I can recall. The late snow did a great deal of damage to our trees. We suffered more than most since our woodland is predominantly very young with large numbers of spindly birch and sycamore reaching for the light. These were particularly prone to snapping and so, although we have cleared a great deal over the intervening months, there are still many snapped tops to be removed this winter.

July's heatwave was very intense but at least did us the favour of allowing a gap of four weeks between grass cuts and so save a cut for later in the autumn. However, the real effect of the heat is becoming apparent now with the autumn colours appearing early. I am already noticing a number of our shallow rooted trees such as beech and sycamore showing signs of stress.

Although August was very mild and quite damp, there was certainly not enough rain to affect the water table or indeed even match evaporation from our ponds. These are all at a very low level with one of the Marlpit ponds on Rusthall as well as the pond by Cabbage Stalk Lane now being completely dried out. This is not really a bad thing as one of the reasons that heathland ponds are so important to amphibians is that their occasional drying out precludes the survival of fish and so removes the source of much of the predation on amphibian young. However, one can have too much of a good thing and I think we should all keep our fingers crossed for a wet winter or we could be in serious trouble.

Probably the single most important event of the Summer in habitat management terms has been the arrival of the new flail-collector on the Commons. We have entered into a five year experimental

agreement with one of our contractors and he has now acquired this major item of equipment which enables us to not only cut large areas of grass and scrub but, crucially, collect all the cuttings and allows us to remove them from the site. In essence, this allows us to replicate the action of grazing animals and reduces soil fertility over time. This should gradually starve out the more aggressive, gross feeders such as bramble and nettle and encourage finer grasses and wild flowers. I have been very pleased with not only the finish left by the machine but also the speed at which it can operate. We undertook one round of clearance in July and by the time that you are reading this we should have been back and cleared the areas that we sprayed with Asulox at the end of July to kill the bracken.

As we move into the Winter, the emphasis will turn to tree clearance and this year we will be starting a rolling programme of clearance of roadside trees. As I am sure everyone is aware, we live in a world that is becoming increasingly litigious and so liability is an issue that is assuming ever greater importance. One of the major risk factors for the Conservators is roadside trees. We also took receipt of our new management plan from the Kent Wildlife Trust last year and this identifies the creation of more scalloped and graded woodland edges as a key target to help both floristic and invertebrate diversity. Our programme to cut back the road verges can therefore satisfy both objectives. We have dealt with most of the immediately dangerous trees on the Commons roads over the last ten years, so we are now in a position to concentrate our efforts in specific areas each year. Obviously, we will select the most pressing areas first, so this winter we will be targeting parts of the A264 as it crosses Rusthall Common as well as Rusthall Road. It is not our intention to remove all trees, most large undamaged native specimens will be pollarded and then managed to create more veteran trees for the future. Clearance will concentrate on scrub, saplings, damaged trees and non native species such as sycamore.

Steve Budden

THE ELUSIVE PURPLE HAIRSTREAK

In recent years, some twenty-five species of butterflies have been found on the Commons, but some are seen only occasionally. Perhaps the most elusive is the Purple Hairstreak, a relatively small but distinctive butterfly with beautiful reflective purple patches on its forewings. The hairstreaks, of which there are five British species, are a generally secretive group of butterflies related to the blues and coppers. They get their name from the variously shaped narrow white markings which they all have on the undersides of their wings. In the case of the Purple Hairstreak, the white lines stand out on a grey background. Along with all but one of the British hairstreaks, it has a small 'swallow-tail' at the corner of its hind wings. The tail is associated with an orange eye spot, and the two together act as a defence mechanism. When the butterfly is settled with wings folded, a predator such as a bird may mistake the tails for antennae and attack the wings instead of the insect's head. The butterfly then has a chance to escape, perhaps leaving just a bit of wing in the bird's beak.

Although the Purple Hairstreak is actually quite widespread in Britain, it is rarely seen because it spends most of its life high up in the branches of oak trees. Unlike most butterflies, it does not need to come down to drink nectar from flowers, because it gets all the nourishment it needs by sucking honey-dew from the oak leaves. Honey-dew is the sugary substance secreted by aphids which provides food for many insects, most notably ants. The caterpillars of the Purple Hairstreak also live on oak, feeding on the flower buds and young leaves in the spring, before turning into a chrysalis and producing adult butterflies in late summer. It is unusual to see an adult Purple Hairstreak coming down to ground level, so it was a great surprise when a participant on one of the Museum's mini-beast safaris in August found a female on the heather patch near Victoria Grove on Tunbridge Wells Common.

Two other hairstreaks are occasionally seen in the Tunbridge Wells area, and, although they have not yet been recorded from the Commons, they are worth looking out for. The spring-flying Green Hairstreak is the only truly green British butterfly. The upperside of the wings is plain brown, but the undersides, exposed when it perches with wings folded, are a rich light green with a single white streak. This colouration is an effective camouflage against the fresh leaves on which they sit. Male Green Hairstreaks are territorial, each taking up a position on a prominent shrub, from which it flies out to intercept potential rivals. This habit of guarding territories is found in several butterfly species, and is a means of monopolising passing females.

The summer-flying White-letter Hairstreak is also plain brown above, but the brown undersides of its wings are enlivened by orange borders and the distinctive w-shaped streaks from which it takes its name. As the food plant of its caterpillar is elm, this butterfly has suffered greatly from the destruction caused by Dutch elm disease. However, there are some surviving elms on the Commons, especially on the edge of the fairground, and this is where White-letter Hairstreaks might be seen. Although they do sometimes feed at flowers, they spend most of their time up in the trees, so they can easily remain undetected.

The largely autumnal Brown Hairstreak, with rich orange-brown forewing patches on the female upperside and similarly coloured undersides in both sexes, is sadly no longer found in Kent or East Sussex. Its decline has been attributed to the over-enthusiastic trimming of blackthorn hedges on which its caterpillars feed. But if it should ever stage a comeback into our area from its strongholds in West Sussex, there is some apparently suitable habitat remaining on Rusthall Common.

Ian Beavis



Editorial.

I recently received a letter of resignation from Mrs Margaret Bardner as a "Walker" (deliverer of Common Ground). Mrs Bardner, who has been distributing Common Ground from the very first edition (August 1991), has reluctantly given up due to mobility problems. We are all very grateful to Mrs Bardner for her many years of practical support as indeed we are to the others who also deliver Common Ground, or help as members of work parties, or who help with litter collection, or serve on the Committee. The Society can only be as good and effective as we make it.

Continuing with this theme, our Chairman, Jenny Blackburn with her helpers has been busy clearing the foliage from around the railings at the top of the footpath leading up to Mt Ephraim (opposite the Royal Wells Hotel). These railings (which were donated by the Friends of the Common) have since been refurbished and now look very smart. A similar maintenance exercise is being undertaken on the railings round the Chalybeate Spring.

By the time you read this the first of the winter Work Parties will have taken place. These work parties take place once a month on the first Saturday morning in the month throughout the winter (timetable appears elsewhere in this newsletter) and much has been achieved by the members taking part. It is a very satisfying and enjoyable way of spending a morning in the fresh air. You don't need to be particularly skilled and tools are provided. So come and join us!

It has been suggested that we should make some comment on the Spa Fest affair. However, very few members have expressed interest in this subject and I have come to the conclusion that the subject has already been done to death. The recent publication of an article in the "Index" Magazine and the Courier Editorial of 1st September have effectively put an end to the matter.

GVL

Letters to the Editor.

In writing to the editor to enquire whether the family subscription was due Mrs Betty Jenkins set down a few recollections and comments about the Common which I thought readers might like to share.

" Alas our days of walking on the Common are past (my husband is in a nursing home), but we still care about it. May I therefore indulge in a few memories (both of my own and my late parents).

Firstly, my mother was a founder member of TWGGS which at that time (1906) was facing Tunbridge Wells Common in London Road. The girls used the Lower Cricket ground for playtime, and until the 1920s my father played for the Mount Pleasant football team, whose home ground it was. He also remembered the road (now called Mount Edgecumbe Road) being known as the "Donkey Drive" for well known reasons. I was pleased when the name of "Cabbage Stalk Lane" was made official with a sign, but sorry that the Donkey Drive, with its beautiful Japanese Cherry Blossom, was not acknowledged.

Before 1930, harebells grew on the Common where we went as a family every Saturday as my father played for, and was a member of, the Lyndon Park Cricket Club for many years. I haven't seen harebells there since the War. Talking of the War, a bomb fell on the Higher Cricket Ground in 1942 and I took part in working parties throwing stones back into the crater. How the Cricket Ground recovered was amazing - I can't remember this as I joined the WRNS in 1943.

In 1926 or 1927 my father bought No 5 Southfield Road, Tunbridge Wells, and we occupied the first and second floors, but the ground floor was let to a Mr and Mrs Romary who had retired, leaving their son Jeremy to run the biscuit business in Church Road and later the factory was built on what is now Showfields estate.

The picture of the ginger beer bottle, one of which was used as a stone hot water bottle for my younger brother, also brings back memories."

Officer & Committee Membership 2005-2006

Officers: (elected annually)

Chairman:	Jennifer Blackburn	Tel:546520
Vice-Chairman:	David Wakefield	Tel:523983
Hon. Treasurer:	Mark Denison	Tel:528199
Hon. Secretary:	Sylvia Luckhurst	Tel:526121 Ex. 3251

Committee: (elected for three years)

Jonathan Balcon	Tel: 515741
Dr Ian Beavis	Tel: 523007
John Davie	Tel: 525557
Dan Goddard	Tel: 535042
Pat Maxwell (Membership Secretary)	Tel: 521968
Ann Hughes	Tel: 527657
George Lawson (Editor Common Ground)	Tel: 524019



The
Spa Hotel

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