

COMMON GROUND

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS
AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 3 Autumn 1992

1 YEAR OLD, NEARLY 300 STRONG

Chairman's Letter

In the space of just a year we have raised a membership of nearly 300, witnessed the publication of the Management Plan and its adoption by the Conservators together with many recommendations from the Friends, helped fund the restoration or replacement of some 40 seats, hosted two fine walks, published three newsletters, begun work on opening vistas in Happy Valley and over Mt. Edgcombe Rocks, seen the appointment of Steve Budden as the Commons Warden, and ridded one area of the Common from the Knotweed menace!

Obviously we alone **have not** been responsible for these achievements. The support and encouragement of the Conservators and their officers, the **KTNC**, our Corporate members, many volunteers and **supportive** non-members have helped us in many ways.

Credit due to Friends

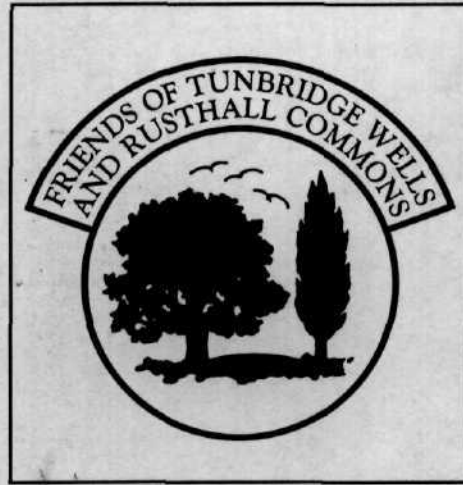
Nevertheless, I do not think it unwarranted to say **that** the future of the Commons **now** looks far rosier **that it has for** many years, **and** a great deal of credit is due to the Friends for that happy state of affairs.

The last communication you had from your Committee was an invitation to a meeting at the Town Hall to discuss the Management Plan. A useful debate took place **and** a further submission to the Council was made of those views.

The Management Plan's adoption is a watershed. It is now a point of reference for all concerned, particularly the new Warden (see opposite) whose appointment is itself another milestone.

Seats

As our first year comes to an end I think it right to give some attention to our major item



of expenditure and support - seats. Some have said that we have gone **a bit 'overboard'** on the seat programme, and we have taken due note.

To date the contractor, Dave Sissons, has made an excellent restoration job of over 20 original **'Hawthorn'** seats, and over 20 others have been repaired or resited. In particular I draw the attention of the membership to the clean up and **resiting** of seats in Victoria Grove, where there is now a lovely shaded view of the Higher Cricket Ground, the Wellington Rocks and the Periquito Hotel.

The seat programme has absorbed much of our first year's income of nearly £3000.

Subscriptions and Covenants

We are now nearly **at** the point of agreement* with the Charity Commissioners leading to our approval as a charity, which in turn will enable us to reclaim tax on covenants. **As** you will know subscriptions are now due (see the enclosure).

My positive remarks at the commencement of this letter should in no way be interpreted to mean that the need for a strong and active membership has been lessened! Please **re-join NOW**. And if you can spare just a little more this year, please do.

My thanks to you all for your tremendous support and enthusiasm for the cause of better Commons, and to my Committee for their continued efforts. **WPS Sept 92**

* Postscript. Agreement obtained.

The Warden

The Conservators have created a new full-time post of Warden for the Commons in accordance with one of the recommendation of the **KTNC's** Management Plan. The man selected for the post is Mr Steve Budden, 38, who has a diploma in tree surgery management from Merrist Wood College, Guildford, and who, for the last 6 years has been foreman of a local tree surgery firm - Treework. Steve has also done many years of voluntary work for the Sussex Trust on Ashdown Forest, working on heathland restoration, forest management and the conservation programme generally. He was the Head Warden for ten years at Old Lodge Nature Reserve organising all the weekend work leaders. He thus has ideal experience for his new job. To begin with he has a 3 year contract. He will have a uniform so will be a visible point of reference. Mr Budden, who was appointed mid June, has already made his presence well felt and we can be sure that his appointment will lead to better-kept and more economically run Commons.

He will organise voluntary work as well as direct labour and contractors. Anyone wishing to do **work** on the Commons or who has any point to make about them should contact him at his office, which he shares with Sylvia Luckhurst, in the Town Hall (Telephone TW 526121).



Meet the Warden, (above) see back page.

Diary

September 12th

Andrew Scheiner and team work on Fir Tree Pond.

September 19th

Learn to use a brushcutter, light volunteer work. Meet the Warden. 10.00 Fir Tree Road Carpark.

October 11th

Kent High Weald Volunteers working on heather protection in area of grassland near Victoria Grove. 10.00 Fir Tree Road Carpark.

October 31st

Litter pick. Details to be announced.

November 26th

Winter lecture by Ian Beavis, and Christmas party. 19.00 Town Hall.

December 13th

KHWV working on restoring acid grassland between Highbury (London Rd) and steps down to London Rd (opp Vale Rd). Details nearer time.

Mr Sissons the seat man

Dave is the man who has done, and is doing, so much work on the Commons' seats and benches to bring them back into use. Members might like to know he is available to repair and renovate ironwork and seats. His address is 67 Summervale Road, Ramslye, Tunbridge Wells, tel. 521961.

Map Planned

The Friends plan to produce in the near future an annotated map for walkers on the Commons, indicating the features of historic interest. In the longer term I hope to prepare a plan with more detailed commentary, to be ready in time for the exhibition on the history of the Commons in Tunbridge Wells Museum and Art Gallery from 17 July to 3 August 1993. To assist with this, I would be grateful to receive any unpublished information on either of the Commons, their buildings and natural features.

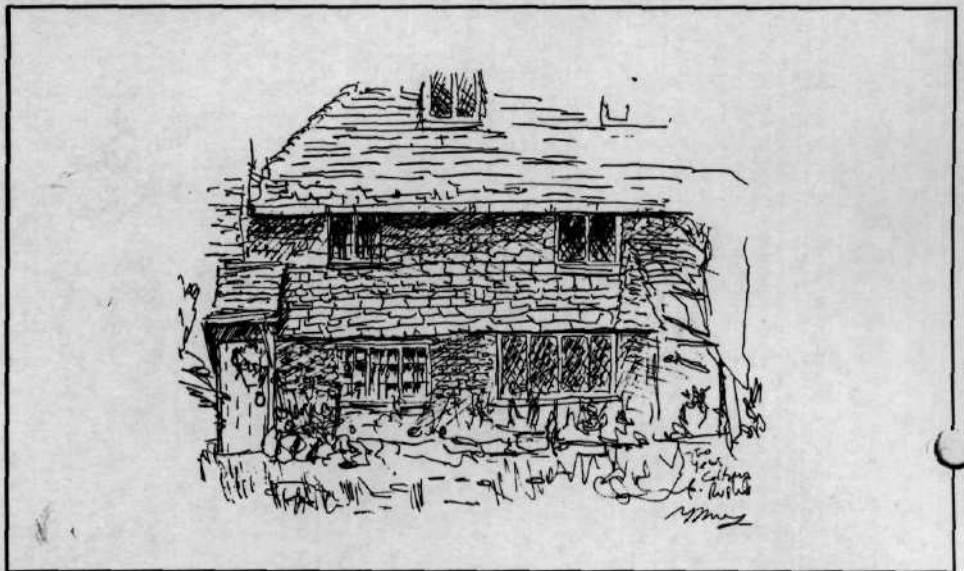
Ian Beavis. Tel. 526121 ext 3171

OPEN SPACE

Your letters and contributions are warmly welcome. Please submit material to:

Mark Roelofsen
1B Montacute Gardens
Tunbridge Wells
TN4 8HG

FOCUS ON



Two Yews Cottage, Rusthall. Drawn by Mr T. May

There are still many things to be discovered about the Common. For example, the early history of the Manor of Rusthall is very obscure. Colbran's town guide of 1839 claims that it dates back to around 1300 and has some intriguing speculations on the site of the original manor house which apparently have never been followed up. The antiquity of the Manor implies at least a scattered population preceding the discovery of the Chalybeate spring in 1606, the traditional starting date for local histories. Two Yews Cottage,

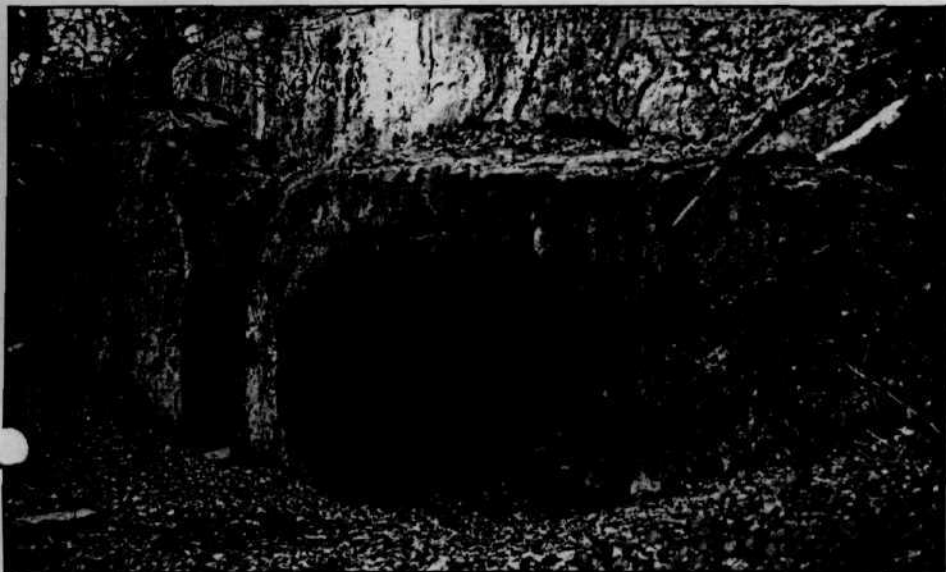
Lower Green Road, on the edge of Rusthall Common, bears a date of 1571 and may therefore be the last surviving dwelling from the pre 1606 period. (see drawing by Mr T May).

Another mystery is the original purpose of the rock cut shelters at Happy Valley, near the 101 Steps. They are first mentioned by Colbran as 'curious excavations ... which have served occasionally as dormitories for gypsies & c.' A later tradition claims they were used by sweeps for depositing soot.



Exposure: Chairman, Patrick Shovelton, (foreground) and Peter Hoole expose rocks by St. Helena during clearance of the Japanese Knotweed.

RUSTHALL



store, gypsy dormitory, view shelter? The caves at Happy Valley.

These statements are doubtless true, but the caves would not have been carved out for these purposes. The best suggestion so far is that they are shelters for seats from which visitors could admire the views, in which case they probably date from the development of the Cold Bath and surrounding pleasure grounds in 1708.

The traditional names of minor rock formations at Denny Bottom have never been fully documented. A late Victorian guide relates that 'when as a visitor you explore this locality, you

will soon discover that you are an object of mercenary interest, and almost before you are aware of it you are under the guidance of a self-appointed cicerone, and from his lips will learn that well nigh every rock has its name'. Recorded names include the Little Toad, the Elephant, the Fox's Hole, the Footsteps, the Cradle, the Bloodstain, the Lion and the Pig's Head; but in many cases it is not known to which rocks these refer. **IB**

N.B. Can members suggest locations for some of the rock formations mentioned in Ian Beavis's article?

Briefly...

The Japanese Knotweed Menace

The Japanese Knotweed between Gibraltar Cottage and St. Helena was glyphosate sprayed after the initial attack on it by the Friends in May, and again more recently. It will have a third spray soon and hopefully that will be the end of the Knotweed in this area.

New Chairman for Conservators

Mr Jack Girling, formerly Chief Executive of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and

Clerk to the Commons Conservators, has been appointed a Conservator by the Lord of the Manor, and elected Chairman for the remainder of this year. Mr Lurcock has retired.

The Local Plan

The friends were asked to comment on the Local Plan and did so in some detail. The main point we made was that the Plan as drafted made almost no reference to the Commons, and we suggested that not only should this omission be repaired, but emphasis should be laid on the inviolate nature of this special adjunct to the town.

Friends Far and Wide

Awareness of The Friends is spreading. Common Ground editor Mark Roelofsen, received a call from Cornwall asking how Castle Road got its name. A quick call to Ian Beavis established that there used to be an Inn or Pub at its junction with London Road, after which the road is named.

Early in the Summer Patrick Shovelton was delighted to receive a letter, and donation, from Mrs Mary Cookson-Jones, residing in Malta. Now in her nineties, perhaps Mrs Cookson-Jones is our eldest supporter as well as our most distant.

MEMBERSHIP

CORPORATE

We are delighted to have recently received as Corporate members the Periquito Hotel, and Private Patients Plan (PPP). PPP are looking into the possibility of helping us in various ways.

INDIVIDUAL

Our individual membership is now approaching 300. Hopefully, as awareness of the work we're doing spreads, and members renew subscriptions and recruit more members we will be able to pass this important figure by Christmas.

IMPORTANT Non-Member Readers

Membership is open to anyone who is keen to see the Commons restored to their former glories. Your subscriptions (£5 per individual, £10 per family) will help us to achieve that aim. Apply to David Wakefield, Hon. Treasurer, 68 London Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN1 1DT.

Tunbridge Wells Diamonds

An interesting aspect of the town's history are Tunbridge Wells Diamonds', described in 1839 as 'transparent substances, apparently pebbles, which are found upon the several paths leading to the Common'. According to this account, 'these crystals, when cut and polished, are extremely brilliant, and are introduced into rings, brooches and other ornamental articles of jewellery'. Little crystalline pebbles can still be found around Wellington Rocks, but has any of the jewellery made from them survived to the present day? **IB**

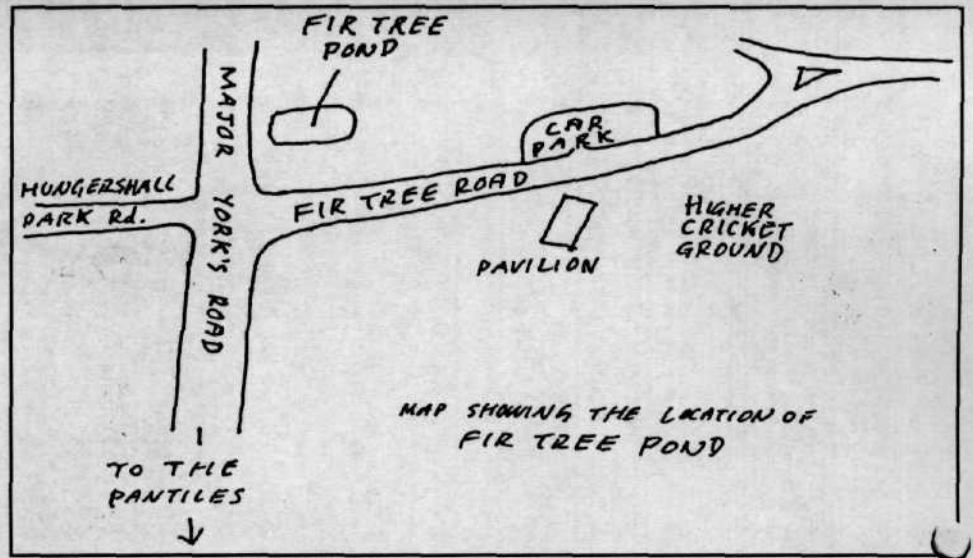
FIR TREE POND - SOON TO BE RESTORED

Fir Tree pond is one of many features on the Commons which over the years has waned into obscurity, so perhaps a description of its location will be useful. It is just in from the junction of Fir Tree Road and Major York's Road. Probably the easiest point of access is from Major York's Road from the footpath of which it is quite visible, if you look for it!

In recent months the pond has been the subject of much volunteer work. In May, during Environment Week, a devoted band of volunteers led by Brian Rolleston and Peter Freeman began to clear the trees in and around the pond, and surrounding bracken and scrub. Once accessible again Bill Godwin of the Council and members of the Parks Department winched out of the water fallen trees.

The pond was already looking better, and benefiting from more air and light.

On July 3rd the work was continued by volunteers from the **Skinner's** School who laboured most of the day and made much progress.



The next contingent to work on it will be Andrew Scheiner and friends. Andrew is raising money for participation in an Operation Raleigh project overseas. Anyone wishing to sponsor him for his very valuable endeavours can do so by sending cheques made payable to Raleigh International to him at Hallborough, **Penshurst, Kent TN11 8AS**.

Further work will take place on September **19th** (see 'Meet the Warden'). It is hoped that conditions will then be right for a concerted attack by a specialist sludge clearance vehicle making it possible for a real pond with a reasonable depth of water to be recreated.

Hopefully next Spring we will have a lovely new pond in Tunbridge Wells.

VOLUNTEER WORK by Peter Hoole

With the adoption of the Management Plan, and with Mr Steve Budden as Warden, we now have a clearer perspective of what work needs to be done, how, and when.

Acting as a co-ordinator of voluntary work the Warden will be able to ensure that the **efforts** of the volunteers are most **effectively** applied.

At our open meeting it was clear that some members would be more than happy to assist in small scale projects at their own speed, and at a time convenient to them. Now that Mr Budden is in place he will be pleased to hear from any members who, acting on their own or in small groups, would like to help. He will then suggest an appropriate task bearing in mind time available, equipment, and fitness!

As a result of the increased likelihood of members undertaking **work on** the Commons the Committee has decided to affiliate to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), which amongst other things enables us to insure **all** our members doing voluntary work at a very low premium.

CHAINSAW TRAINING

Obviously we would like to use chainsaws where appropriate but no insurer will cover a chainsaw operator who does not hold a certificate of competence. The advantage of holding such a certificate is evident, and not just in the Friends' interest, but those of members' own, too.

Consequently I am prepared to arrange for a minimum of four people to receive the relevant training. It would take place over four mutually convenient days, on the Commons, at a cost of £150, at the end of which you should be suitably competent to receive the certificate. You will be required to bring your own chainsaw and safety equipment.

It is a substantial outlay, one The Friends cannot be expected to finance, but would be an excellent investment for anyone keen to use a chainsaw. If you have non-member friends who may be interested they will be welcome to participate. Please contact me, Peter Hoole, on TW 539977.

BRUSHCUTTERS

We are more fortunate with the use of brushcutters (**strimmers with circular sawblades** in place of nylon cords). They are highly effective in clearing undergrowth, brambles, and saplings.

MEET THE WARDEN

The Warden feels we can make a great contribution if we could field an army so equipped. Since no certificate is required for their use - **YET** - he has kindly agreed to meet us on Saturday 19th September at 10am at the Fir Tree Road carpark when he will demonstrate their use.

Do please come along. If you can bring a brushcutter, visor/goggles, ear protectors, and steel toe-capped boots all the better. If not, don't worry, still come. Some general clearance work will necessarily take place, so bowsaws, billhooks and hand tools will be useful, too.