

COMMON



GROUND

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS
AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 21. Autumn 1999

A BUSY SUMMER

Chairman's Report by David Wakefield

This last summer has marked a busy period in the life of our Society. First, there was 'Frolics' held on 17 July in lovely sunny weather. You can read more about it elsewhere in this newsletter.

Secondly, we have launched a drive for new members, which has proved very successful. Prompted by our Vice Chairman, Peter Freeman, the committee decided to write to all those kind souls who had signed our petition two years ago. The results have been excellent: we are in the midst of counting and enrolling, but it looks as though we might have about one hundred additions to our ranks.

Welcome to you all

The Town's transport strategy document grinds slowly along, in bottom gear. A number of meetings have been held around the town and views canvassed from groups representing various interests, such as walkers, cyclists and of course, special interest groups such as ourselves. Written submissions were also sought, and we have responded. The summary of these views, produced just a few days ago, makes for confusing reading. Whilst 'A' wants the A21 widened, 'B' is adamant that no further road building can be justified.

Our own views are included, such as no parked cars on Commons roads, but whether we will be listened to is another matter. One lone voice is still calling for an underground car

park on the Common, but I sense from the views expressed to me that that is something which we do not want.

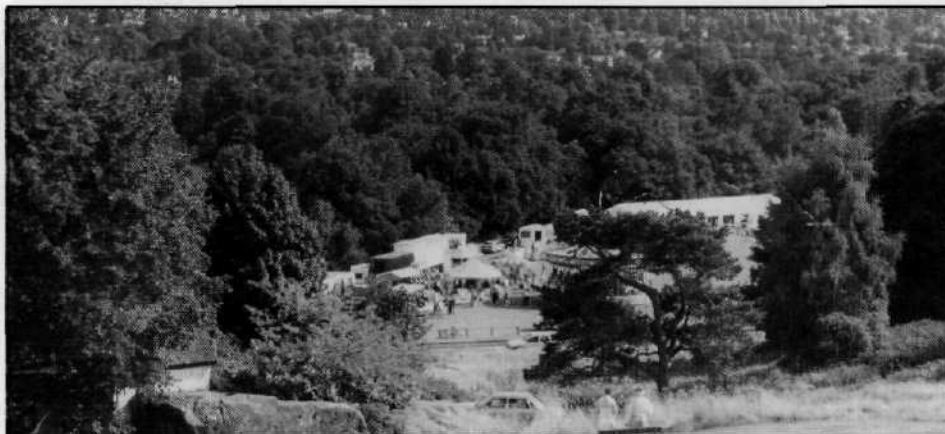
Two matters about which you should be warned. First, the A26, that is the London Road, is to be resurfaced throughout its length, starting in January 2000. The Highways Department of Kent County Council is adamant that the work needs doing, though it was resurfaced only a very short time ago. The road will be partially closed where

transport strategy conflicts

possible but in certain sections, such as across the Common, it will be totally closed, and traffic re-routed away from it. You have been warned.

Secondly, the Town Council has asked the Commons Conservators for permission to extend the old fashioned sign posts, which you might have seen around the Town, indicating where the Pantiles are, and the way to the railway station, to include four on the edge of the Common. I myself feel that it is not really helpful to tell a stranger who is already at the edge of the common, where the Common is, but have had to agree reluctantly to yet more signs.

To end on a more pleasant note, our Annual Dinner is at the Spa Hotel, on 28 January. See you there.



SPRING LITTER PICK

16 April

Start Time 10am

at Fir Tree Car Park

or The Brahms Pub (*for those who want to concentrate on the Rusthall end of the Commons*)

Annual Subs

Members who do not pay their Subscriptions by Bankers Order are reminded that the 1999/2000 subs were due on 1 October 1999. A reminder letter is being sent out with Common Ground. Please use the tear off slip when sending in your remittance.

FRIENDS' ANNUAL DINNER

This will be held on

28 January 2000

at the Spa Hotel

Make a note in your diary, forward planning section.

We will be addressed by Chris Clennett, Gardens Manager, Wakehurst Place on developments of the gardens at Wakehurst Place and construction of the new 'seed bank'.

FOR SALE

Members are reminded that the "Friends" have a stock of Christmas Cards and other items for sale:

Christmas Cards	-----0.25p each
Notelets	-----0.25p
Maps of Tunbridge Wells Common	-----£1.50 each
Maps of Rusthall Common	-----£1.50 each
Mugs	-----£3.50 each
Jigsaw Puzzles	-----£4.50



Creatures on the Common 1999

The year 1999 has generally been thought of as a poor one for insect life, an impression backed up by press reports in the summer. However, although many species were late in appearing, due to inclement weather early on, and some well-known garden butterflies such as the Small Tortoiseshell were remarkably scarce, most of the smaller inhabitants of the Commons seemed to be flourishing, and a number of interesting observations were made.

The Ringlet butterfly, described in the last issue as a new arrival on the Commons in 1997, showed a remarkable increase this year. At its peak in the second week of July, it was in evidence in a variety of spots on both Commons, generally feeding at bramble flowers and sometimes in considerable numbers. The best places to see it were the acid grassland areas along Mount Ephraim and in the vicinity of Highbury. The Brown Argus, easily confused with the female Common Blue but with a total absence of blue scales, made its second appearance on Tunbridge Wells Common, having been found once before in 1996. On that occasion it was recorded at Mount Edgcumbe Rocks, and this year it was not far away, at the heather patch by Victoria Grove.

Day-flying moths, sometimes confused with butterflies, also had a good year. The Orange Underwing, which flies in March and April.

sunning itself with outspread wings on the bare ground of wide footpaths like the Race Course or feeding at willow catkins, was much more common than in previous years. The black and red Six-spot Burnet, an insect of high summer which is surprisingly rare on the Commons and in some years not seen at all, showed encouraging signs of becoming more widespread. The Small Yellow Underwing, much daintier than its well-known nocturnal relatives, had not been recorded on the Commons previously but was found in May at Mount Edgcumbe Rocks and the nearby Mount Ephraim grassland.

The dragonfly fauna too produced some surprises. A single example of the White-legged Damselfly had appeared at Brighton Lake in 1996, but this could well have been a stray from established colonies just over the Sussex border. However, in July this year up to three were seen along a woodland path in the middle of Tunbridge Wells Common, not particularly close to any of its three ponds. This species, whose creamy white coloration plainly distinguishes it from other damselflies, often hunts its insect prey at some distance from the bodies of water where it breeds, but the appearance of more than one in the same spot suggests that it is now breeding somewhere on the Common. From a national perspective, the White-legged Damselfly is reckoned to be a scarce and declining species,

as it is particularly sensitive to pollution. The Downy Emerald, a medium-sized metallic green dragonfly, is entirely new to the Commons list. What was probably the same individual was seen on several occasions at Brighton Lake between mid-June and early July. This is another species recorded regularly from the woodlands of the Sussex border which could potentially establish itself on the Commons in the future.

The Oak Bush-cricket is a remarkably elusive insect since, unlike all the other British grasshoppers and crickets, it spends its life high up in the trees. It is likely to remain unrecorded from a site unless an occasional individual finds its way to ground level, maybe as a result of being blown down by the wind. Although widespread in the Tunbridge Wells area, it had not been discovered on the Commons until September, when an example of this delicate pale green species was found on a rock beneath trees at Denny Bottom. There are now four species of bush-cricket, distinguished from grasshoppers by their long antennae, known to occur on the Commons. These include the formerly rare Long-winged Conehead, which in recent years has undergone a remarkable increase in range and numbers throughout southern England and is now regularly seen in grassy spots on both Commons.

Ian Beavis

Warden's Report: Autumn 1999

It has been a fairly quiet summer on the Commons with the now familiar routine of grass cutting, both the standard cuts and the "hay-meadow" cuts, the removal of the everpresent litter that increases each summer (particularly during the school holidays), and the control of bracken. This year we have started to experiment with a new technique for bracken control. Instead of cutting the bracken as we have in previous years, we rolled, or bruised it. Experiments indicate that laying the bracken out in a straight line and lightly crushing it causes it to slowly bleed to death, using up far more of its stored energy than simple cutting. It will be interesting to monitor the effects of this treatment over the next few years. As long as it is at least as effective as cutting, one clear advantage I can see to this technique is that unlike cutting, we can allow the heather and grasses to grow relatively unchecked whilst continuing effective bracken control.

I am sure almost all of you noticed the appalling vandalism earlier in the year at Wellington Rocks when someone defaced them with blue paint. This utterly mindless action provoked a lot of anger in many people in Tunbridge Wells, and even made the television news. After some searching, a non-toxic, biodegradable product was found that would draw the paint out of the porous rock so that it could then be removed with a pressure hose. Although this work, carried

out by an excellent local firm called Powerhouse, was not as expensive as I feared at £350, it has, even with the great care that was taken, caused considerable damage to the rocks by removing parts of the outer weathered surface along with the paint. Fortunately, there has not been any repetition of this damage, and we must hope that a few sharp frosts this winter start to create a new weathered surface.

As those of you who regularly walk the Common will have noticed, two areas on Tunbridge Wells Common have very recently been cleared of all vegetation. These areas, one at the junction of the Victoria Grove and the footpath from Wellington Rocks to the station, and the other further over towards Major York's Road between the Upper Cricket Pitch and the Racecourse, are scheduled as new heather areas. Both areas were hit by fire two years ago with all of the scrub and most of the trees being killed. All the burnt vegetation has now been removed and the bracken litter and topsoil has been scraped off to expose the very sandy subsoil. As soon as the Ashdown Forest Conservators have carried out their annual heather cut, we will import some of the cuttings and spread them on the newly exposed areas to allow the seed to drop out and set. If this technique is successful, and I can see no reason why it shouldn't be, we will be able to create a series of "stepping stones" of heathland across the Common to help the spread of those species

such as the common lizard that have suffered so much from habitat loss since the grazing animals disappeared at the beginning of this century.

Two new paths are also planned for this winter's work schedule. One will run from Fir Tree Road car park, through the woodland adjacent to Bishops Down and will rejoin the main path towards the Spa Hotel. The other will start around the junction of Major York's Road and Hungershall Park and run through the dense woodland towards the junction of the Racecourse and the drive to Bracken and Gorse Cottages. Both of these paths will be fairly small and will be unsurfaced, but I know some of you like to explore new areas so keep an eye out for their appearance.

The fire site where the path from the Fairground car park meets Hungershall Park has continued to regenerate well and this Winter we plan to improve the area further by removing the damaged and dying sycamore scrub that borders Hungershall Park, and replacing it with native tree species.

Over on Rusthall Common, the volunteers have already been in action clearing bramble, gorse and scrub from around the Toad Rock, and more work will be carried out in the same area over the winter period. Some thinning and clearance of scrub and trees, especially sycamore, will be carried out around the Marlpit pond area and in the adjacent woodland.



FROLICS
on the
COMMON
1999

17 July 1999

This eagerly looked forward to event was held on the Lower Cricket Ground in glorious weather on 17 July.

One side of the ground held the marquee, from which came the bar, the hog roast and the Friend's tea. Another side held the fun fair, dominated by a 19th century carousel, all brass and wooden fittings. At the far end were the horse and donkey lines and in the middle, the children's running tracks.

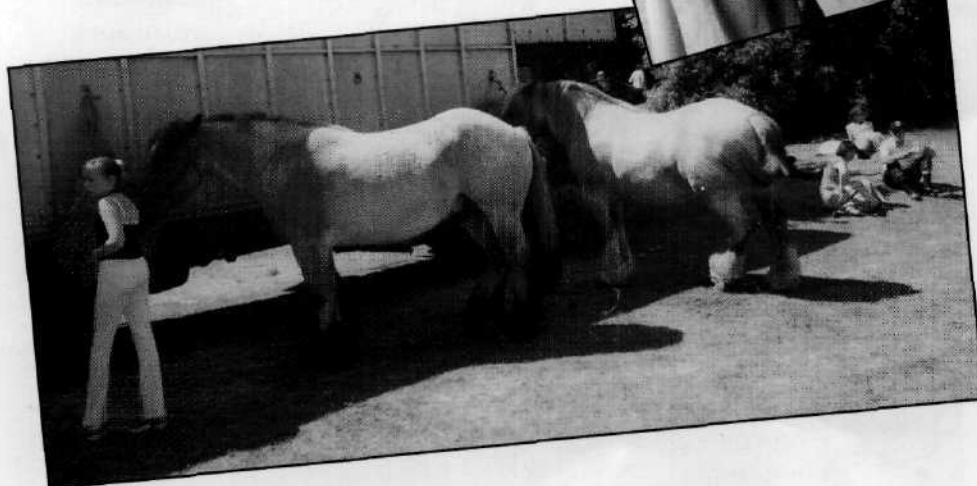
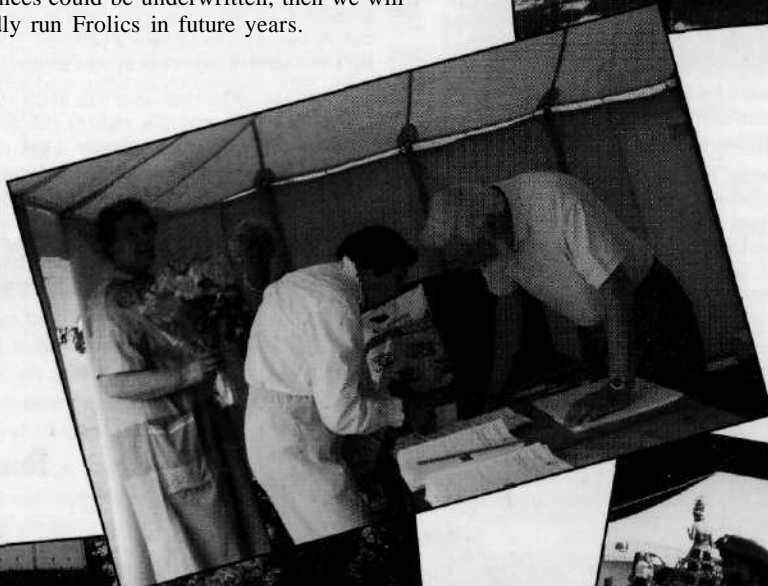
The traditional games this year were stoolball, the Ladies of Kent versus the Ladies of Sussex and as an innovation, the old Kentish game of bat and trap. A team came from the Plough Inn at Basted to play our own team from the Town.

Filling in various spaces around the ground were the coconut shy, punch and judy, ice cream and a host of stalls illustrating craft skills or selling craft goods.

The photos show the lady mayoress, Mrs Peggy Ealden, receiving a bouquet of flowers from your Miss Payne (escorted by Prinny himself), the Town Crier in full voice, the Mayor Councillor Ealden in the stocks (having been placed there for some reason by Beau Nash), the stilt walker, horses and most important of all, our Treasurer George Lawson signing on a new member.



The general consensus is that frolics was a great success especially in raising the profile of the Commons within the Town, and that we should consider doing it again. The Chairman and the Treasurer are going to see the Leisure and Tourism officials about holding it again, possibly on a regular basis. Our only problem is that of finance. Since we do not charge for entrance and do not charge for participation in most of the games, we find it very difficult not to make a loss. If the finances could be underwritten, then we will gladly run Frolics in future years.



COMMON WALKS D

RUSTHALL COMMON

The walks which cover Rusthall Common are both short but can be run together to make a single walk of moderate duration. The reason for keeping the walks brief is that the nature of the terrain with its rocky outcrops and crevices makes it almost impossible to resist the temptation to clamber and explore. It would be difficult to get very lost. Also, by sitting quietly at some places – and there are many seats available on the walks – you may be fortunate to see something of the wildlife of the Common, perhaps a wren, no longer a common bird but not at all shy if you are in the right place at the right time, or one of the shyer animals.

WALK D1

Approximate length of walk – $\frac{3}{4}$ mile
Allow about 30 minutes

1 This walk begins at the gates of St Paul's Church, Rusthall. The church was built in 1850 from local sandstone and, until the middle of the 20th century when residential development had taken place near the church and the trees of the Common were permitted to grow unchecked by grazing sheep and cattle, stood as a landmark for many miles about.

Take the pavement which runs from the gates past the war memorial on your right and soon bear right to the entrance to Nevill Park. Continue along keeping the white gates and fence on your right, to where the asphalt path meets the Langton Road, which we cross and take the path right to the Rusthall Road. Cross and follow the pavement **2** left. At a point between the 3rd and 4th lamp posts, a rough path drops down right and winds between rocks covered with lichens, moss and ivy to the Old Bull's Hollow quarry.

The combination of impressive rock faces, trees and undergrowth was particularly appealing to the Victorians who found it 'romantic and awe inspiring'. They would look at the rock formations and find any number of likenesses to people, animals and things, and many rocks at Rusthall are known to this day as the Parson's Nose, Lion Rock, the Elephant and the like even though the similarity may have been somewhat fanciful in the first place and not much improved by a century and a half of erosion.

3 The path when it finds the rough floor of the quarry wanders out to the left to a point close to a rocky headland where it swings right. Almost at once you meet the driveway to a cottage which sits to your right. Take the drive as it rises left to a road signed Rusthall Park. The group of rocks on your left through which the road was cut are the Parson's Nose rocks. Victorian photographs show a credible silhouette but today the likeness can just be seen from the other side of the rocks.

Proceed straight across the road beside a large stone and brick garage and as the sandy track emerges above a clearing drift off the path to a seat looking across Harmony Street which runs through this hollow.

5 Facing you is one of the best known sights of the district – Toad Rock – "Toad Rock is to Tunbridge Wells what the leaning tower is to Pisa" wrote E V Lucas in 1904, and this time there is no denying the considerable likeness to its namesake. It is apparently an entirely natural phenomenon. This area has recently been designated a Geological Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Make your way to the road which runs in front of the Toad Rock Retreat public house. This is Upper Street which curves away up round the rocks and peters away to a sandy track which we leave by taking the asphalt path left. This rises through the rocks until it meets the Rusthall Road. Alternatively, continue round and pick up the path at the Rusthall Road. The way in which houses have fitted into the valleys of the rocks have always been a picturesque feature of this part of Rusthall. At

6 Rusthall Road ignore the path directly opposite

7 but turn left and at a point just before the entrance to Harmony Street cross Rusthall road to a track which leads through the undergrowth to a clearing (much used for ad hoc games of football). The path cuts across the clearing to where a short stretch through trees brings you to Langton Road* again. Cross a little to your left and you are on the drive up to Rusthall Church where we began.

* (If you wish to link up with Walk D2 you need not go back to base but instead of crossing Llangollen Road, follow the pavement right to the finger post and pick up the walk there.)

8

WALK D2

Approximate length of walk – $1\frac{1}{4}$ mile
Allow about 45 minutes

Start this walk by the gates of Rusthall Church. With the war memorial behind you take the asphalt path straight ahead skirting a small meadow. Soon we cross the Langton Road (carefully, it comes upon you quickly!) and take the asphalt path left to a finger post. Take the branch to the right marked High Weald Link route. This runs straight as an arrow for about 400 yards between trees and bushes, emerging close to the cross roads at Rusthall Green. Cut the corner left at Coach Road passing, or resting, at the seat facing across the old drinking fountain.

10 The Common on both sides of Coach Road is well known locally as the place to collect crab apples and wild raspberries in season (although blackberries are invading the territory). Go straight over Coach Road to a path which soon emerges from the trees to a small glade in which there are two ponds. The larger one on the left is evident, the smaller one may have to be searched for as it sits down among the undergrowth. Newts are abundant in, and dragonflies above, the large pond. Bear a little to the left at the large pond and the track winds through the clearing to a set of steps cut into the wooded bank ahead. Ascend the path to the left through the light woodland ahead which winds its way to a wider section where other paths join. This place has a number of medium sized oak trees, bear right at the more mature oak, 4 yards on seek a path left. You will see a seat under a beech tree by the Langton Road.

A little to your left on the other side of the road is Tea Garden Lane and the sign to the Beacon Restaurant. Go down Tea Garden Lane (since there is no pavement, walk on the right facing any on-coming traffic, of course!) Just before you arrive at the 'Beacon', cross and take the gravel track off sharp left and soon there is a seat, the

first of a number along this stretch of the way.

We are walking along the top of any escarpment and the views off to the South West towards Crowborough are very fine. The escarpment which forms the southern limited of Rusthall Common is the same geological formation as forms the northern edge of Tunbridge Wells Common. The spire in the middle distance is that of St Mark's Church, Broadwater Down, in Tunbridge Wells.

Continue this walk spurning the apparent paths leading down the cliff edge. They are irresistible to children, exciting and very dangerous. Soon you will come to one of the seats which faces a flight of steps descending a less precipitous section of the escarpment. These steps were originally cut and paved with sandstone treads in the 18th century and led down into Happy Valley.

After admiring the view descend the steps. The number of steps is not, it seems, always the same: "about 105" is the best official estimate. One reason for losing count may be a distraction off to the right near the foot of the flight (or on the left coming up of course!). A short path leads to what maps show as "caves" - in fact shallow niches cut into the rock face, probably in the 18th century when there was much activity to develop Rusthall as a tourist health resort in opposition to or as an extension of the facilities at Tunbridge Wells. There are on Rusthall common remains of a cold bath and other buildings of the time, and an even earlier Assembly Rooms. You may wish to count the steps as you descend, and if you have companions see if you agree at the bottom.

The path turns left here and passes a number of outcrops of sandstone until it comes close to the more accessible stacks of Happy Valley Rocks. You will see that the rocks here as elsewhere on the Common have been relentlessly attached over the years by people scoring their names and dates into the sandstone. One of the clearest dates from 1929, but most are eroded to unintelligibility within a few decades. A few from the 19th century are still to be made out, it is said, on some rocks on the Common. It can be fun to try to find the oldest at any one group of rocks - but please resist the temptation to add your own carving.

The path here turns left again uphill. Although without benefits of steps, the ascent is never very steep and comes out alongside the churchyard of St Paul's which we skirt until joining the ridge path where we turn right and almost at once find ourselves back at the gate and memorial where we began our walk.

