



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 38. Autumn 2005

Diary of Forthcoming Events

Annual Dinner

Friday, 10th February
2006

7pm for 7:45pm

Annual General Meeting

Thursday, 20th April
2006

7pm for 7:30pm

The Town Hall,
Royal Tunbridge Wells

Work Parties

Saturday, 3rd December,
2005

Saturday, 8th January,
2006

Saturday, 4th February,
2006

Saturday, 4th March,
2006

Saturday, 1st April,
2006

For all sessions meet
at the Fir Tree Car Park
at 10:00am

From the Chairman

The last days of Autumn! The colours are still good but then we haven't had any frosts yet. Welcome rain came this month – long may it continue to fill our ponds and reservoirs.

I took a walk in Pembury Woods earlier in October in search of the RSPB's goats. I failed to

find them but I did see the fencing and public notices. Neither were particularly intrusive so I think that if the Conservators decide on this step in the future, selected areas of our Commons would benefit from their style of grazing. I also read that Kent Wildlife Trust

have restored beavers on their Ham Fen Reserve to good effect. All these initiatives show us the way forward in conserving the natural beauty of our Commons.

Finally, I would urge all of you who have not yet signed up for a Standing Order and Gift Aid to consider doing so when you renew your subscriptions this month. In 2004 when we applied for Gift Aid refunds we received £420 from the Inland Revenue. You only have to pay Income Tax equal to 28% of your contribution for a claim to be made by us. We currently have just over half our 266 members signed up so please do consider it – you only have to do it once as Gift Aid declarations cover current and future years (until you notify us otherwise). If you are not sure then please fill in the Gift Aid declaration anyway.

Jenny Blackburn



Time machine - Back to the Commons - Year 1914

The Federation of Grocers' Associations of the United Kingdom holds its Conference at ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS.

The souvenir brochure invites for a stroll on the Common:

The Common skirts Tunbridge Wells. It is all about it. It is Tunbridge Wells. Let the eye sweep it from a point hard by the strangely-named eminence called Gibraltar, as it stretches in a south and westerly direction broadening out, and everywhere presenting knoll, dip and pleasant up-slope, emergent sandstone and fringing or abundant foliage and this Common, it must be conceded, is like nothing we have seen in all our

travels. Children in the "Golden Age" find it "made for them"; peopled at once in their imagination with fairies and pixies galore. Their elders may be content to find it a heart-healing and a mind-resting rural pleasaunce; a country by a town; a solitude, yet with the world almost instantly at hand. The views from Mount Ephraim, and the Gibraltar eminence are shown in our Guide: from every view point this bush-and-gorse-broken townside moorland delights the eye. And it is pleasant even on wet days; the rapid percolation after rain makes the sandstone soil very quickly firm and dry.

It may be fitting to mention here that in the sunshine record

published by the "Daily Mirror," Royal Tunbridge Wells, with its glorious Common, has secured a higher number of points than any other inland health resort. Those who value sunshine especially may forgive the Wells for not presenting any large expanse of water close at hand. This means that the air is practically free from damp mists and fogs. It may well be that the configuration of the town, with its houses built upon, and well sheltered by, marked upslopes or hills, lends itself yet further to this far famed clearness and radiance of the atmosphere. For a sunshiny walk in perfection stroll over or along the top of the Common from the Mount Ephraim and right away to Rusthall, about one mile distant.

WASP SPIDERS AND OTHER FINDS

On the four Thursdays in August, the Museum organised its regular series of mini-beast safaris in local open spaces for children and accompanying adults. Sites visited included Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons, and under perfect weather conditions many interesting creatures were seen. Most exciting of all were two examples of the large and spectacular Wasp Spider, the first for the Commons and for Tunbridge Wells town. They were found in the grassland along Mount Ephraim, and in the heather patch near Victoria Grove. The Wasp Spider gets its name not because it stings – it is entirely harmless – but because its hind-body is strikingly patterned with yellow and black bands. Its web is unusual too, being decorated with bands of white silk laid out in a zigzag pattern. The purpose of that decoration is unknown, but it is thought that it may serve to make the spider itself less easily visible while it is waiting in the centre of its web for insects to entangle

themselves. Because the web is made low down among grass and other herbage, the spider can often pass unnoticed, despite its size. Until recently, Wasp Spiders were reckoned to be a great rarity, restricted to a few spots on the south coast. In the 1990s it began to spread inland, and it made its first recorded appearance in the Tunbridge Wells area in heathland at Pembury last year.

The safari on Rusthall Common also revealed an unusual spider, this time *Araneus marmoreus*, which translates as 'marbled spider'. It is one of the large orb-web spiders, related to the familiar Garden or Cross Spider. Its body pattern is very variable (ours was greenish in colour), with dark-banded legs. Although widespread in some parts of Britain, this species may be new to Kent. It was found in grassland on the edge of the cricket ground, along with an example of the scarce Roesel's Bush-cricket, characterised by yellow spots and a u-shaped band on the sides of its body. Some readers may have seen the news item in the 'Kent & Sussex Courier'

about the rare cricket found during a nature walk at Barnett's Wood at the end of July. This was the same species, which also appeared on the mini-beast safaris at Hilbert Recreation Ground and Dunorlan. Like the Wasp Spider, Roesel's Bush-cricket is in the process of becoming more widespread than it used to be. In former times it was restricted mainly to the Thames estuary. It is noted for its peculiar song, which is like nothing else in nature and has been likened to 'an electrical discharge such as is emitted by pylon-cables in damp weather'. Grasshoppers and crickets use their distinctive songs, made by rubbing their hind legs against their wings, as a means of communication between the sexes. This enables them to locate each other without compromising the camouflage that keeps them hidden from predators among long grasses or dense foliage.

The Marl-pits on Rusthall Common usually produce a wide variety of creatures on mini-beast safaris, and this year's visit was no exception. Finds included the Common Lizard, widespread on

the Commons but usually seen only fleetingly, and a curious shield-bug with a pointed head known as the Bishop's Mitre. Among four species of dragonflies active over the larger pond was an example of the delightfully named Ruddy Darter. This dragonfly is related to the more widespread Common Darter and has the same basic colour scheme, red in the male and light brown in the female. However, the red of the male Ruddy Darter is a brilliant scarlet, quite different from the duller shade of its commoner relative, and making it a much more impressive insect. As with some butterflies, the British population of the Ruddy Darter is reinforced in some years by migration from the Continent. Whether it lives permanently on the Commons is not entirely clear, but there have been intermittent records from Tunbridge Wells Common, and this is the second successive year that it has been spotted around the Marl-pits.

Ian Beavis

Can mushrooms growing on the Commons turn you into a fearless Viking?



In France, the autumnal wild mushroom season opens with the appearance of the first cepes in August, continues with chateaufort and ends with the sinister-looking trompettes de la mort (trumpets of death), another chanterelle relative which is coal black and grows until November provided there are no nocturnal frosts. A Frenchman or Italian would have great pleasure going through the Common and seek for wild edible fungi.

How can Continentals enjoy wild mushrooms, while we know there is a true English 'fungophobic' tradition?

In France, Luxembourg, and Austria there is a network of official

inspectors. Any amateur mushroom hunter in these countries can be assured of never biting down on a poisonous fungus. All you need to do is take your basket of goodies into the nearest pharmacy. All pharmacists are required to study mushroom taxonomy as part of their formal training, and will helpfully - and for free - identify your finds, often with the aid of an instructive, official chart picturing the poisonous species for the edification of the fungus-drunk public.

On the other hand there must be a clientele over here having great appetite for hallucinogenic mushrooms. Why else under Clause 21 of the Drugs Act 2005 is it now an offence to import, export, produce, supply, possess or possess with intent to supply magic mushrooms, including in the form of grow kits?

The mushroom you find most abundantly on the Common is the

fly agaric (*amanita muscaria*). It is one of the most mystical mushrooms and strangely does not fall under the Drugs Act 2005. Any amateur mushroom picker would however be astonished that studies in rats have shown that the inactivation of an area of the brain through the use of muscimol and ibotenate will inhibit fear learning and the startle reflex - A kind of beta blocker for fear.

These undeniably impressive mushrooms were effectively used by the Vikings when they were getting ready to invade a land and they must have found plenty of supply when they raided Kent. The Vikings essentially turned off their fear emotions, thus gaining their reputation for their fierceness. Vikings would enter a village fearlessly, wreak havoc among the people and carry off the women. Before entering battle, the Vikings would go through a religious ritual in which they would dance around the woods and consume *amanita muscaria*. So the main reason the

Vikings were able to fight without fear is that they were on drugs!

As it turns out the Vikings were lucky that they didn't have to endure a lot of nasty side effects. In many parts of the world these mushrooms also contain toxins that make a person violently ill. The substance is apparently metabolized by the body while the hallucinogens are passed through unchanged. For this reason, some people used to drink the urine of other people (or animals) that had ingested the mushrooms, to get high without any of those nasty side effects. Some specimens contain a great deal of the chemical that makes you sick and very little of the hallucinogen.

Therefore I do NOT recommend the recreational use of the fly agaric, even if you wish to loose all your daily anxieties. - And please claim no responsibility if however you foolishly decide to do so. - How is that for a disclaimer?

Daniel Bech

WARDENS REPORT

It is always a depressing time of year when the clocks go back. This year it has been coupled with a very wet and windy spell of weather which has emphasised the change. However, it's now only seven weeks to the shortest day; so if looked at positively, it's nearly Spring!

The year's big clearance of all the tracks and paths has now taken place and the Common is starting to look neat again. You may have noticed that some areas, such as the original heather restoration site by the racecourse have not been cut. This is because they were treated with Asulox to finally kill off the bracken and we have left them till the full effect of the chemical has been achieved. These areas will be cut in mid November. It is now time to turn our attention to trees, especially roadside ones. This year has seen several of our large Ash trees suffering from die-back. I am guessing that the persistent deficit in rainfall and the consequent lowering of the water table over the last few years is to blame. The effect is likely to be especially severe on our free-draining sandy soil. Our plan is to pollard the larger of the roadside Ash trees in the hope that we can keep them but Ash often does not respond well to pollarding. We will also be carrying out some reduction work on the two large Horse Chestnut trees between the Forum and London Road. This is purely precautionary work following the scanning survey carried out on the trees last year and is designed to prolong the life of these superb specimens.

The volunteers have been focussing their efforts on Brighton Lake so far this season. Following the installation of another memorial bench at the back of the area, we decided to clear the rear edge of the pond and re-expose the sandstone wall there. We have removed most of the scrub and cut away the bramble from the wall but we will probably need to spot treat some of the larger root systems

with glyphosate in the spring.

I am still working on the costings for the implementation of the proposals in our new management plan. As part of our research, I spent a day recently at Saltex, which is the biggest annual trade fair for the landscaping, grounds maintenance and forestry industries. It was very interesting and I now understand why golf club membership is so expensive. All those toys that you see the green keepers on your course playing with are very expensive! However, there were some great bits of kit on show and we have been able to try some of them out on the Common. Our main requirement is for a pick-up flail that can replicate some of the effects of grazing by removing the cuttings and thus reducing the nutrient levels and stopping the build up of the coarser feeding plants such as bramble and nettles. I hope that we will be able to introduce this new kit onto the Common for next year. If you want to see the result of using a collector flail, go for a stroll to Fir Tree pond where the surrounds were cut and collected a few weeks ago.

Steve Budden.

Noteworthy Buildings Facing the Common

While Tunbridge Wells Girls' Grammar School celebrates its centenary in 2005 it may, perhaps, be interesting to look back to 1905, and to reflect upon the prominent part that our Common played in the early days of the School.

Although now firmly established in Southfield Road, TWGGS started life in an existing school building at Vale Towers, No 58 London Road, facing the Common.

In the summer, we are told, pupils played on the Common. At break, at lunchtime and for games lessons, a gaggle of girls would trail across the then comparatively trafficless London Road to play rounders or stoolball on the green beside the Donkey Drive. Also they would chase each other among the gorse bushes; or wander off tree-climbing in the direction of Mount Edgecumbe and the cricket ground. Hardly a situation that could be contemplated in our own more advanced times!

Apparently games could be somewhat hampered by cows grazing on the Common in

those days, and a good cricket pitch could be ruined between break and lunch time.

On sunny days girls would lie out on the slopes with a book, and on snowy ones they would slide down the slopes. Some lessons even took place in this erstwhile "educational Arden", and houses around provided subjects for the drawing class.

Nor are nature walks new to the Common. On an autumn morning Miss Judge, holder of the National Certificate of the National Froebel Union, would shepherd a form out to hunt for toadstools, hips and haws, while on a spring day it would be tadpoles and newts at the Firtree Pond. Then various water-creatures would be kept in bowls in the classrooms.

It is said that the house was built for a Russian Prince, and an illustration by a Tunbridge Wells artist, Charles Tattershall Dodd (1815 - 1878) features in Colbran's Guide of 1844, titled "Romanoff House School".

By 1912 the stone faced Tudor Gothic style building was no longer home to the fledgling TWGGS, and it was advertised in the Official Guide to the town as a "First-Class Boarding Establishment" run by Mrs Weeks. The doorway on the right of my sketch was a window in Tattershall Dodd's time, but a century ago the inscription "County School for Girls" followed the shape of the arch above the doorhead.



Vale Towers
Drawn by Philip Whitbourn

Philip Whitbourn



Editorial.

The following item has been inserted on the Friends of the Commons Web Site and I repeat it here for the benefit of those members who do not have access to the internet, because I feel it is a very important matter.

Help keep the Commons Tidy.

The Conservators employ someone to do regular litter patrols on the Commons but the size of the two Commons and the persistence of the litter bugs makes it very difficult to keep the the whole area litter free. In an effort to supplement the litter patrol, a number of our members who regularly walk the two Commons take a plastic bag with them in which to collect litter they find during their perambulations. Mr and Mrs Goulden have gone even further than this by undertaking regular visits to Wellington Rocks to clear up the broken glass left behind by partying young people who apparently think it fun to smash their empty bottles on the rocks, thus creating dangerous hazard for the many children who regularly play on the rocks. We are grateful for the efforts of all who already help to keep the Commons Tidy but think how much more could be achieved if we all followed their example. So, what about it? Will you help the next time you go for a walk on the Common?"

I now have dates for all the work parties up to the end of Spring, 2006. These are listed in the 'Forthcoming Events' section of Common Ground and will be further published on the Web Site. So to those who are able I once again appeal for your help with the maintenance of the Commons. It is only one Saturday morning a month during the Autumn and Winter months. A small group of volunteers have achieved much in the past. With a few more willing helpers we could do so much more.

The application forms for the Annual Dinner are included with this edition of Common Ground. It is a very enjoyable occasion and this time we are to have as speaker someone who has the responsibility for looking after the whole of Ashdown Forest and who has already experience of the maintenance of heathland using grazing animals. A subject of current interest to the Conservators and the Friends of our two commons. Whilst the dinner may seem a fair way ahead, please don't put the application to one side and forget it. At least put the date in your diary and lets have a really good gathering of members in February.

Lastly, This will be my final edition of Common Ground. I feel it is time for a fresh mind to take over the editorial responsibilities and hopefully, someone younger than myself. I am therefore calling for a volunteer from amongst our members to undertake to edit the three editions a year of our newsletter. Anyone interested in, and willing to undertake this task please contact me either by letter (70 London Road, Tunbridge Wells, TN1 1DX) or by E.Mail (lawgv7@aol.com or by telephone on 01892 524019.

GVL

Officer & Committee Membership 2005-2006

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		Ex. 3251

Committee: (elected for three years)

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