

COMMON



GROUND

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS
AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Issue 17. Spring 1998

Highways across the Common?

Chairman's Report by David Wakefield

Members will want to be updated on the latest position regarding the proposals for putting a five land junction in the middle of the Common, and other vandalism.

The public outcry has been such and from so many different sources and age groups, that the claim cannot be made that it is selfish self interest of a small middle class, middle aged group unrelated to the modern world.

We have now had four months of protest, the highlights of which I will attempt to summarise here. We have seen two large public meetings, both packed out, and with a high standard of speakers. There was no doubt

*Archie Norman,
support us*

at either of these two meetings where everybody stood. Indeed, there was not one single voice raised in support of the proposals. Our Warden came as near to receiving a standing ovation at the end of his heartfelt plea to save the Common as anyone has in the normally reserved precincts of the Town Hall, especially Tunbridge Wells Town Hall.

We have seen a host of letters sent to our MP, who is very supportive of our position, to our local councillors, to the Highways Department and to the Kent County Council. I have read most of these letters, and have been impressed by the well argued points made, by the calls for rational explanation and by the forceful rebuttal of the weak points in the arguments made for the proposals. Needless to say, most of the letters have gone unanswered.

We have instructed a firm of transport engineers to look at the proposals from a technical point of view, and to provide us with ammunition with which to attack Highway's, rather than emotive pleas that we are forced to use, lacking the technical

expertise to challenge the proposals on any other grounds. We await their report with interest.

The Conservators have voiced their opposition at each of their meetings, especially when it became clear that not satisfied with their original demands, Highways are now asking for a further 100 metres strip of Common alongside Church Road. One can only presume that they quickly realised that their original proposals would not work, and hence had to come back and ask for more. What is it that Kipling had to say about the Dane and Danegeld?

We are now at the stage where the Highways Committee is considering the letters and submissions made to it by the public. Our submission is in there, along with those that you might have made. Councillor Mrs Braam who is both Leader of the Council and a Commons Conservator, has said 'this site will be re-visited', by which one supposes that a revision is taking place, but what form that revision will take is certainly not clear.

The local government elections in early May are almost upon us, and this matter is sure to be a 'hot' political item. We must take this opportunity to put our views before councillors seeking election, of whatever political party. Speak to your local candidates, say what you

*Conservators
voice opposition*

think to be right and in the best interests of our community and for our children, and try to ensure that they will not vote for these proposals if we elect them to the Council. Be quite clear, this is very much a local matter, and its outcome rests with us.

After the election, the next major event is the meeting of the Highways Committee, due to be held on 1 June at which the final vote on the proposals will be taken. Let us hope that good sense will prevail.

Meanwhile, the proposals for the large roundabout at the top of Major York's Road has disappeared, but so has the proposals to

*Victorians'
Forethought*

return part of the Common at Fir Tree Road. The slip road, at the top of Church Road where it reaches Mount Ephraim, is not now to close, so that is another bit of the Common which is not being returned to us.

Inner London Road is not to be closed, and hence we are not to be faced with loss of the Common to provide a large turning circle for vehicles. At first sight, it might appear that some concessions had been wrung out from the Highways' proposals, but the major aspects of the vandalism, that is the five lane junction and the loss of a 100 metre strip of Common alongside Church Road, still remain.

Certainly we cannot sleep easily whilst these doubts remain unresolved. Eternal vigilance is the password for the day.

Autumn Litter Pick

This year the litter pick will be held on 11 October. Start point as usual will be 10am at the Fir Tree car park and the Brokers Arms, for those who want to concentrate on the Rusthall end of the Commons.

This is a most enjoyable event, does the Common and one's stomach muscles a power of good.

The letter reproduced below was received from our previous Chairman and we felt members would wish to be aware of his kind thoughts concerning us all. Ed

Dear David

I am writing to thank you and all the Friends who most kindly and generously subscribed to my "leaving" presents last night at the AGM. As I said then I was entirely taken by surprise and found myself unable to express adequately how touched I felt - and feel - by everyone's generosity. I am so glad you have chosen a bench and I look forward with the Friends' Committee and the Conservators to picking out a good site. As for Mr Lee's lovely picture of Bracken and Gorse Cottages and the pond I shall treasure it and it will take pride of place in my study. I have already spoken to him about it to say thank you. I am

only sorry that in my surprised state last night I never unwrapped it so that all could see it and the very nice framing and inscription you had organised.

It has been a great 10 years negotiating with the Conservators to set up the Friends and then being Chairman. I could not have done it without the support of Gerry Brown and yourself in particular and everyone on the different Committees. Nor, I may add, without the unstinting help of Steve Budden and Sylvia Luckhurst and the support of the membership - not to mention the distributors and the Editors of Common Ground.

Your kind words last night and Gerry's eloquent tribute made me feel very embarrassed. I have thoroughly enjoyed my years with the Friends - first, as a relative newcomer to the area, learning so much more

about the two Commons and their history and, second, meeting so many people who feel so passionately about them and their vital importance to the Town. I have got far more out of the association than I can express. To have been given such handsome gifts is too much!

I am delighted you have been elected to the Chairmanship and know the Commons will be safe in your hands and your new Committee. Needless to say, if there is any help I can give in the future (arising perhaps out of past events) please let me know. I shall certainly continue to be involved in the struggle over THE CROSSING.

All best wishes for the future of the Friends and many many thanks to all those who so kindly took part in such generous gifts.

Yours ever, Patrick

AGM Report

The AGM was held in the Town Hall on 11 March, and was well attended, Whether this was to hear the latest on the Highways' proposals or whether it was to listen to our Warden, Steve Budden's talk was not clear.

Certainly, as the public meeting held to consider public reaction to the proposals was held at the same venue only two nights before, it was a miracle that we got anybody there at all. Well done to all who had the stamina to turn up to two meetings in one week.

The accounts show that we have had an excellent year, since we seem to have increased our income somewhat.

	1997	1996
Income	£5789	£4045

To a very large extent this is due to the profit we made on Diversions, and that in turn was due to the hard work put in by several members of the Friends. It is invidious to single out one member for especial praise, but Angela Swain was a tower of strength, both in the weeks leading up to Diversions and on the day itself. She taught us how to sell, and we were very much in need of lessons. Many thanks Angela.

The AGM also marked the retirement from office of our founder chairman, Patrick Shovelton.

Patrick has been in the chair for almost ten years, and we are deeply grateful to him. Perhaps the greatest gift he has bestowed on the Society was getting it started when he did, so that at this moment of grave danger to the Common, we have a group of people who are organised for its defence. What we would have done starting from scratch last November, I shudder to think.

Members clubbed together to give Patrick a present, and raised almost £400. He has chosen to have a bench placed on a favourite corner of the Common: at the North West corner of the Lower Cricket Ground, almost in sight of his sitting room windows. We all hope that he will get some use out of it. The rest of us surely will.

Steve Budden is in charge of placing the hawthorn seat, and for getting it suitably inscribed.

Annual Dinner

This year the dinner had Brigadier Constantine as the speaker. Brigadier Constantine is the Warden for Ashdown Forest, and what he had to say was of great interest to members.

Ashdown Forest is much bigger than the Commons, but in their fight to retain its essential features we have something to learn from them. They are rebuilding the walls which keep the deer inside the confines of the

Forest, and are trying to keep intrusion by cars to a minimum, not least by reducing the speed limits across the length of the Forest to 40mph.

We had eighty people sitting down to dinner. The food gets better each year and I can thoroughly recommend it as a social occasion. Made a date for next year.

Tea Party

11 July 1998



Our major Summer event will be a Tea Party, to be held on 11 July at Manor Lodge, Bishops Down, by kind permission of our Vice Chairman, Peter Freeman.

The party starts at 1600 hrs. There will be no charge, but in order to cater for numbers, would those coming please give Sylvia Luckhurst a ring on Tunbridge Wells 526121.

We will have to limit the numbers to about 80, since the garden size is not all that large.

Through there is no charge for the tea itself, the Chairman will make some scones and those who wish to indulge might like to pay a small sum towards our funds.



Diversions were such a success that we have decided to hold them again in 1999, changing the title to Frolics (in order to avoid any chance of misunderstanding about road closures) and to alter the format very slightly, in that we are going to concentrate a bit more on children.

The proposed programme will give some idea of the lines we are thinking along.

2.00pm	Stoolball matches start (in costume)
2.00pm	18th Century Cricket Match (in costume)
3.00pm	Ass Races
3.30pm	Jingling Matches
4.00 - 5.30pm	Boys and Girls Races
4.30pm	Terrier Races
5.00pm	Sack Races
5.30pm	Wheelbarrow Races
6.30pm	Tug-of-War

We will have the marquee like last time, and will serve drinks, ice creams and wholesome food.

We hope to have some interesting animals present, besides the horses which came the last time.

We will finish at about 7pm. Before we conclude, we hope to hold for members of this Society our Annual Tea Party.

The Exhibition

As part of the consultation process called for by Councillors after the abortive November meeting of the Highways Committee, an exhibition was held in the Town Hall setting out the proposals and calling for public comment.

The exhibition was held in the foyer of the Town Hall, on the first floor and consisted of about ten display panels. The first nine of these had nothing to do with the controversial proposals at all, but showed previous work done in the Town on such matters as the pedestrian precinct in the Royal Victoria Project, trees etc. It seemed as though the public was being softened up by seeing something with which nobody could object to i.e. pedestrianisation, as a precursor to asking them to agree to the next proposal, 'let's have a slice off the Common for cars and through traffic'.



Photo courtesy of Kent and Sussex Courier

The comments which I heard were very much along the lines 'we don't think that much fresh information has been imparted, nor was there any justification for the expense and damage caused and we certainly don't agree with the necessity for taking Common land'.

I would estimate that over the three days about 150 people attended the exhibition, and of these about 130 signed our petition against the proposals.

We finished up with about 1800 signatures on the petition. Many thanks to all who took part.

I myself saw only a little of the exhibition, since I was banned from the Town Hall during its course on the grounds that collecting signatures against the proposals was not allowed on Council property. Though it was cold outside, I felt that I had the better of the deal, since I attracted a lot more attention on the steps of the Town Hall than I would have done inside.

It was at this exhibition that it first became apparent that a further slice of the common was to be taken, over and above that already included in the proposals made to the Highways Committee in November, a mere twelve weeks before. Obviously, a mistake had been made, someone had blundered, and a correction was called for, at the expense of the dear old Common.

How can we possibly trust the Highways Department to get things right in future?

10 Years on the Common

by Patrick Shovelton

It was after the Great Storm of 1987 that I, like many others, began to get thoroughly worked up about the upkeep - or the apparent non-upkeep - of the Commons. Progress in clearance of fallen trees, stumps and areas of bramble and weed seemed to be infinitesimal; literally hundreds of seats were broken or overgrown; and many paths had been reduced to narrow slits through bracken and bramble with some disappearing altogether. The task seemed quite beyond the permanent workforce then employed.

In order to try and get a voice among the Conservators, and to try to influence this situation, I at first tried to register as a Freehold Tenant but found that my house was 10 yards outside the magic boundary. I then turned to the idea of setting up a charity - The Friends of the Commons. This was in 1988. There was nothing original in the idea. It was simply copying what had been done in the case of many museums, theatres and hospitals - and, coming nearer home, in the case of Ashdown Forest. Indeed, our Objects and Rules (as they became) were based on those of the Friends of Ashdown Forest.

I put the idea of setting up the Friends to the then Clerk of the Conservators but it found no

favour. The Conservators "didn't want to know". I suppose they feared interference - whereas the body I had in mind would be there to help - help with funds and help with work.

Eventually after three years of argument and pressure - and a change in the Clerkship and in the composition of the Conservators - opinion changed. At the same time the Freehold Tenants were pressing for a Management Plan and the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation were recruited to produce a full report and plan for action.

I was invited to meetings of the Conservators in the spring and summer of 1991 to outline my ideas and approval was given to further talks between the Clerk and myself. The result was the negotiation of Terms of Reference for the Friends in relation to the Conservators - a document commonly called the Concordat.

With this in place we were in a position to call a public meeting. This was done by notification through the Press and by the wide distribution of the leaflet. We had arranged a room in Monson House sufficient for 70 people. Over 100 arrived and we had to troop round to the Town Hall - good for publicity! - to use the Council Chamber. There, generously assisted by the Chief Executive of TWBC and the Clerk of the Conservators, we established the Friends. A Committee was recruited on the spot and we were in business.

Since then progress has, I think, been steady. Our Objects and Rules were submitted to the

Charity Commissioners and we were approved as a charity in 1992. Over 400 members have been recruited and more are gradually coming in. Thanks to the Concordat we have a seat at Conservators' meetings and ever since Steve Budden was appointed as full-time Warden in 1992 we have had the closest and most helpful relations with the Conservators. And, thanks to the understanding of the Clerk, Sylvia Luckhurst has been able to be our Secretary - a duty for which we now reimburse the Conservators.

Over the years the activities of the Friends have grown. At first there were work parties and litter picks and a major concentration in replacing many old seats with the Hawthorn (Dave Sissons) type now seen widely across the Commons and which are much more vandal-proof than traditional seats. Then came the annual Barbecue and Dinner and the Warden's valuable annual illustrated report at the AGM. In 1997 we held the Bicentenary Diversions event and it is good to know that this tradition is going to be maintained in 1999 with Frolics. The major current concern is, of course, the Highways plan to take several hundred acres of the Common (and a fine red oak) to widen the London Road/Church Road crossing - a plan being vigorously opposed by the Friends. Naturally I hope that this opposition will prove successful. And I hope too that the Friends may prosper over the next 10 years and indeed as far into the future as we can see.

Friends of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons - Membership of Committee 1998

Chairman	David Wakefield Tel: 523983
Vice-Chairman	Peter Freeman Tel: 524110 Fax: 549208
Hon Treasurer	Lt Cdr G V Lawson Tel: 524019
Secretary	Mrs Sylvia Luckhurst c/o TWBC Tel: 526121 ext 3251

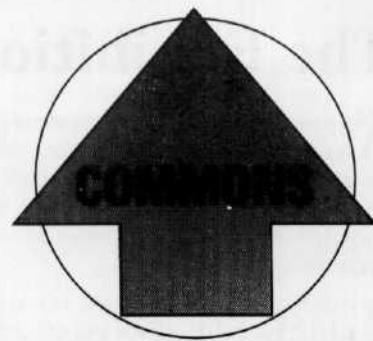
Members	
David Barton	Tel: 522318
Dr Ian Beavis	Tel: 523007
Mrs Jennifer Blackburn	Tel: 546520
Mark Dennison	Tel: 528199
Dan Goddard	Tel: 525042
Conrad Payne	Tel: 513626
Mrs Ann Revell	Tel: 520475
Legal Advisor	Michael Stewart
(home)	Tel: 540673
(office)	0171 836 0011
Fax:	0171 379 5928

Co-Opted Member	
Andrew Weaver (for Juniors)	
Receiving Papers and Minutes	
Representative of the Freehold Tenants	
Nick Hill	Tel: 520599
Peter D Hoole	Tel: 01580 752193
Gerald L Plastow	Tel: 530487
Attends all meetings, if possible	
The Warden - Steve Budden c/o TWBC	Tel: 526121 ext 3250

COMMONS WALKS

IN AND AROUND

ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS
& RUSTHALL

Reproduced here is one of a series of 5 walks on the Commons taken from a brochure produced by the Borough Council. They have very kindly donated fifty copies to the Friends, which the Chairman holds. Any Friend who would like a copy for free should give the Chairman a ring. Further copies are on sale at the Tourist Bureau at £1.50 each.

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMON

Looking out from the steps of the pavilion we can see the church of King Charles the Martyr across the road. Starting as a mere chapel of ease in the early 17th century, it grew bit by bit with the town and boasts a notable ceiling by Henry Doogood, Christopher Wren's master plasterer. Many famous people have worshipped there including Evelyn and Pepys and too many kings and queens to mention. Princess Victoria before her accession to the throne was a regular worshipper when she stayed in the town in the early 19th century.

- 12** Turning back to our walk, look left and take another asphalt path off to the **left** and then join another asphalt track turning **right**. This rises gently through pleasant light woodland to a place criss-crossed with paths. Take the second asphalt track on the right. This curves easily away to the left and soon you will glimpse through the trees the red brick old Post Office over the London Road. However, another asphalt path crosses our way and we take this turning left.
- 13**
- 14**
- 15**

About 100m along you will see down on your right an old oak tree surrounded by iron railings. Until recent shrub clearance revealed the old railings the oak had been virtually lost from sight and has now been re-discovered as Princess Anne's Oak planted at about 1700 to commemorate Princess (later to be Queen) Anne's connection with the town. It is one of the **oldest** trees on the Common and it may be worth deviating from the path to read the small plaque on the railings.

17 On returning to the path continue down to the London Road. There is no pavement here so carefully keep to the left for a few paces until you turn left up Mt. Edgcumbe Road (better known by its old name of Donkey Drive). You can walk along the grassy verge below the cherry trees, or if it is wet underfoot use the road (it is one-way and you will face any oncoming traffic). At the T-junction you will see a number of paths ahead leading into the higher parts of the Common. Ignore the path straight ahead and take the gravel path to the left (it begins under the spread of an oak tree by the traffic sign). Walk up until you come to a seat at the start of an open area. Continue straight on, noting a fine stand of trees on the left of the clearing. This is part of Victoria Grove and we stay faithful to our track until it converges with the far end of the Grove.

18 At this point we will take the asphalt track that runs across our way, down left. Before doing so look back and you will see the cricket ground and the outcrop of rocks known as Wellington Rocks with Wellington Hotel visible across the road behind. Descending down our asphalt path between shrubs and trees, crossing the old race track, and emerging from the trees close to the entrance of the Major York's Road car park - we are virtually back to where we started the walk.

19



Stonechat

Approximate length of walk - $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles
Allow about 1 hour

Is the Common Protected by Law?

We had thought in our innocence that all common land was protected by law from incursion, whatever the source, be it property developers, golf course builders, supermarket parking lots or even, highways departments determined to assert themselves, whatever . . .

In our own case, this is true, but only to the extent that the central part of the Common is protected. The County of Kent Act charges the Commons Conservators with the responsibility to protect the Common from incursion, but gives them some leeway in respect of certain matters and certain parts of the Common.

Thus the Conservators are permitted to allow the erection of 'tents, removable lodges, fences, posts, rails, . . . roads or footpaths' at their discretion and only on parts of the Common marked in red on a map of 1890. The red strip runs around the edge of the Common.

What our Highways Department have seized on is the word 'road' and they are using this as an excuse to place a five lane junction in the middle of the Common, build a roundabout at the top of Major York's Road, take a one hundred metre strip alongside Church Road . . .

What did our Victorian ancestors have in mind when they listed the above exceptions to their stated policy of no incursion? They certainly were not thinking about motorways.

Was it not their intention to permit access to the houses on the edge of the Common? We can get some insight into their thoughts when we examine the 1890 map more carefully. Then we see that the 'red' strip goes round the edge of the Common. Where a road goes across the Common, the 'red' strip does not follow the road, but sticks to the edge of the Common.

We rest our case, M'lud.