



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 33. Spring 2004

Diary of Forthcoming Events

AGM

Thursday 18th March,
2004

7.00 pm

At the Town Hall
(Council Chamber)

**It is your Society
Come along and
have your say**

Work Parties

Saturday 6th March,
2004

Meet 10.00 am Fir Tree
Car Park

Litter Pick

Saturday, 3rd April,
2004

Meet at 10 am at Fir Tree
Road Car Park or at
Common View Rusthall

Tea Party

Wednesday 14th July,
2004

Venue yet to be announced

From the Acting Chairman

It was lovely to see so many of our members at our Annual Dinner at the Spa Hotel on Friday, 20th February. Everyone seemed to be having a good time and our speaker, Caroline Fitzgerald's illustrated talk on heathlands was very informative. It was also a pleasure to have the company of Tunbridge Wells Mayor, David Wakefield and his wife, Ruth. He rather amazed us all by revealing that the new management plan - yet to be completed - may recommend grazing on the common! For further news see David Wakefield's comments elsewhere in this issue.

So I urge you all to attend our Annual General Meeting on March 18th when we

will be able to ask questions and discuss the issue. Please also volunteer to become a committee member - we have several vacancies. Meetings are roughly every 2-3 months depending on the season and last about 2 hours. We would particularly welcome any women on to the committee.

I have seen no diggers around the junction at the top of Major York's Road but we are assured that work will begin soon!

Fencing around the 101 Steps down into Happy Valley has been installed by the Commons Conservators due to the poor condition of many of the steps which might lead to nasty accidents. While we regret this action, the committee

are hopeful that it will be a temporary measure pending discussions with English Heritage over a more permanent solution. The cost of restoration may be around £50,000. It is up to us and the users of this area of the common to comment and get involved in the discussions via our Society. Challenging times for us all!

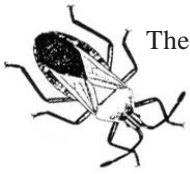
Finally my desire to arrange more guided walks on the commons has been derailed by my dilatoriness in getting on with organising them and finding suitable leaders who are not already fully booked for 2004! If you know anyone local who would be able to do a "Dawn Chorus" walk for us, please let me know - 01892-546520.

Jennifer Blackburn.



Sheep grazing on the common around the Brighton Lake c.1905

NEW DISCOVERIES IN 2003

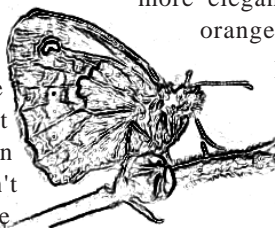


The list of insects recorded from the Commons continues to grow. Some of these new creatures have probably been around all along, escaping detection because of their small numbers, while others are genuine new arrivals. The newly discovered insects of 2003 are a mixture of these two categories.

Jewel beetles are, as their name suggests, brightly coloured and exotic-looking insects. They are more characteristic of warmer climates like the Mediterranean, and only a few species occur in Britain, most of them rare. The Two-spotted Jewel Beetle is long and slender, dark metallic green in colour, with white marking which include the two conspicuous spots on the wing cases from which it gets its name. These markings are formed by shining hairs rather than pigment, and so they stand out strikingly against the darker background of the rest of the insect. When the beetle spreads its wings to fly, it discloses the remarkable colour of the body beneath in a brilliant flash of deep metallic blue. On a hot day in June, several of these beautiful creatures were flying around the root plate of a fallen tree near Wellington Rocks, settling regularly and running over the surface before taking off again. They were presumably congregating in one spot to provide an opportunity for the two sexes to get together. For an insect which doesn't occur in large numbers, finding a mate can be difficult. Gathering at a focal point is a strategy which many species employ to surmount this problem. The Two-spotted Jewel Beetle, like most of its family, starts life as a larva feeding inside the trunks or stumps of dead trees. Although it used to be very rare in Britain, it has become more widespread in recent years thanks to the amount of

fallen timber provided by the great storm of 1987.

Another new arrival is the Box Bug. This too used to be a great rarity, found only at Box Hill in Surrey, where it was associated with the famous trees from which the place gets its name. However, over the last ten years it has adapted to life on other plants such as hawthorn and yew, spreading throughout Surrey. By 2002 it had crossed the border into Kent, being first recorded at Edenbridge, and by the following year it had reached Tunbridge Wells. The Box Bug hibernates as an adult and can be found late in the year on ivy blossom. There were two records from Tunbridge Wells Common in the autumn of 2003, both on ivy, one at Mount Edgcombe Rocks and one at the 'South of France' (the edge of the Common near Mount Ephraim House). The Box Bug is related to the angular dull brown Common Squash Bug, which is commonly seen on dock leaves, but is a rather more elegant insect with an orange tint.



Day-flying moths are a select group of insects which defy the usual presumption that moths are all nocturnal, as well as confusing inexperienced naturalists who look them up in their butterfly books and fail to find them. One of them is the Common Heath (not to be confused with the Small Heath, which is a butterfly), light grey or sandy in colour with a pattern made of a delicate network of fine black lines. True to its name, it is found in heathland areas, a declining habitat in

our part of the world, where its caterpillar feeds on heather foliage. In mid-June, a Common Heath was flying on the open grassland near Wellington Rocks, visiting the clumps of Heath Bedstraw with their closely packed small white flowers. This attractive little moth is no doubt one of the Common's original inhabitants, and it is pleasing to find that it has survived from times when heathland and acid grassland were the dominant vegetation here.

Ian Beavis.

The Major York's Roundabout

Members might like to know the up-to-date position regarding the above. Indeed, as this matter has been hanging over our heads for so long, it is perhaps time that we explained again why the Conservators and this Society agreed to the work being done in the first place.

It all goes back many years, at least back as far as Patrick Shovelton's time as Chairman of our Society. We were given a list of suggested alterations to traffic arrangements around the Tunbridge Wells Common, including the removal of parked cars on Major York's Road, and Castle Road, the introduction of cycle ways along the A268 and across the Common, and we agreed in principle and then we heard nothing further. For year after year.

Suddenly a few months ago, the officers for Highways at both Kent County Council and here in the Borough, called for a meeting, and said that funds were now available, but that they had to be spent in this financial year, that is the work had to start before the end of March 2004.

When the Conservators came to look at the proposed schedule of work, they found to their surprise that all the original proposals had been dropped, all that was left in was the round-about at the top of Major York's Road.

Even worse, the Conservators and this Society had agreed to reluctantly, but with the quid pro quo that we should get back an equivalent amount of common land, our chosen piece being a part of Fir Tree Road, that is the bit between Mount Ephraim, and the entrance to the Fir Tree Road car park. This would mean the closure of that part of the Fir Tree Road, but would solve the increasingly bad parking situation in the Road.

The new proposals ignored this trade off, instead, offering sub quality land to that which was to be taken for the roundabout, and we decided not to agree.

Subsequently, we read from the Courier that the original proposals have been reinstated, that is the roundabout at the top of Major York's Road to go ahead, with the closure of Fir Tree Road along the length stated above.

Agreeing to the loss of common land is never done lightly, but in this instance the Conservators and the Society felt that the pay-off, in terms of improved road safety and general amenity was worthwhile. I hope that we can all still agree on this.

It now only remains to be seen what the actual roundabout will look like. It's been a longtime coming.

David Wakefield

Warden's Report

As I explained in my last report, the new management plan commissioned from the Kent Wildlife Trust by the Conservators is currently being prepared. Whilst this process is underway, we decided to initiate no new clearances on the Commons this winter. Instead, we have concentrated on clearing any suspect or dangerous trees particularly alongside the roads. Most of you will have noticed the clearance alongside London Road between Church Road and Mount Edgumbe Road. We have also had to reduce several trees at the bottom of Strange's Avenue and we have removed a large oak that was leaning across London Road opposite the Vale Royal Hotel.

Major York's Road has also had several birches removed plus crown lifts on several limes and sycamores. Many of you will, I am sure, have noticed the severe pollard of the large horse chestnut at the bottom of Major York's by the entrance to the car park. Inspection of this tree revealed severe rot and cavities in the main bole of the tree. Sadly, I suspect that this tree will need to be removed within the next few years. Rusthall Road has also had a number of trees removed between Langton Road and Bretland Road and clearly more work will be required over the next few years to create a sensible verge. Many of the trees along Rusthall Road have been allowed to get far too large and encroach too close to the road, and most are badly infested with ivy. The final stage of remedial work for this year will take place on the recently cleared site adjacent to Cabbage Stalk Lane, where there are several large trees that need either reduction or removal.

Although my comments about holding back on new clearance apply to most of the Commons, we had two offers that we couldn't refuse at Denny Bottom. Firstly, the local climbers group, funded by the British Mountaineering Council, offered to carry out clearance work at Bulls Hollow. Bramble and scrub has been encroaching onto the top of the rock faces for some time and because of the nature of the site I

have always considered it too dangerous for our volunteers to undertake the clearance. However the climbers with all their specialised equipment were able to both clear the tops of the crags and then abseil down the faces removing any saplings starting to get a hold. At the same time, they also persuaded local tree surgery firm Down To Earth to donate three days work to the project, which enabled us to remove some of the damaged trees from the base of the Hollow as well as crown lifting the lower branches from some of the large trees on the rock faces. As a result of this work, Bulls Hollow has been transformed. As well as this, we were fortunate enough to secure £4,000 from English Nature to remove invasive scrub and saplings from within the SSSI. This generous grant has enabled us to carry out a significant amount of work but there still remains a great deal to be done in the area as well as the regular maintenance that will be required just to keep pace with the re-growth.

Many of you will be aware of the recent closure of the 101 Steps at Happy Valley. This feature has been becoming gradually more hazardous to use over the past few years with the steps becoming increasingly eroded and slippery. Most people in fact tend to walk down the edge of the steps as a safer alternative. In the light of the clear potential dangers to users and the increasing culture of liability and litigation, the Conservators felt they had no alternative but to exclude the public from the area. There have been ongoing discussions over the past few years about the future of these steps and what level and style of refurbishment would be appropriate. However, the only clear thing to emerge from these talks so far is that except for the most basic of repairs, this project is far beyond the Conservators budget and outside funding would be required.

In the short term, we are talking to our insurers to obtain their view on whether something short of full closure would be acceptable but I fear that this issue could rumble on and on.

Steve Budden

OF CELANDINES AND GLADES

Readers may recollect our oldest and most distant member lived in Malta. In this first part of her fond memories of the Commons Mary Cockson-Jones, arrives in Tunbridge Wells, aged around 6, shortly after the death of Queen Victoria.

I was born at the end of the Victorian age in that very Victorian part of England the Isle of Wight, within sight and sound of the sea; so it was a great change a few years after the old Queen's death to be torn away from the huge white cliffs, the esplanade and the beloved pier. I was told about Tunbridge Wells, which was to be my new home, but I had no other place with which to compare it, so my imagination could not build my future play ground. I fastened on to a few facts, and looked forward with some growing interest to actually seeing the Common and above all the Brighton Lake where there was water for paddling and sailing my small boat.

BRIGHTON LAKE

Very soon after we had settled in, I was demanding to be taken to see this longed for stretch of water. We lived in Madeira Park and one morning our kind housemaid, knowing that I must greatly miss my nurse, took me through the fascinating Cumberland Walk and unfamiliar Pantiles until, lying passive at the foot of a wide-spread grassy countryside, was the Brighton Lake! But how small! How colourless and how still! Where was the sandy shore to build sand castles? I do not remember voicing my disappointment, I think I realised that it would be useless. We sailed the boat on a bit of string for short distances, but I do not recollect ever visiting the lake very often. I turned my attention elsewhere - to wide acres of Common, full of bushes and trees and grass and flowers.

I was an only child and my father was my constant companion, taking me for walks on the downs, pointing out the different flowers and giving them names. With some shame I remember correcting my nurse who spoke of "the pretty buttercups." Those aren't buttercups, nanny. They're celandines I gently told her.

A SECRET GROVE

The Common sloped upwards above the Lake until the bare, open spaces became grown over - naturally and pleasantly, with trees and bushes, hazel, gorse and bramble. On one Spring, Sunday morning my father and I found a treasure to take the place of the sea shore. It was a small innocent and unexplored grove, lying hidden from any paths or open spaces. The copse was protected by the green budding branches and tall climbing plants, hiding it from view or being trodden over by careless intruders. The sunshine spread a gentle light, the breeze equally gently gave a welcome to the finders of this magical glade - no one knew of it but ourselves, and we went home and told my mother all about it. I had found a home and to this day I have never forgotten it. But alas, it was a magical place, and we never succeeded in finding it again, so remote behind the Lake, and 'off the beaten track.'

The Common stretched all along the back of the Pantiles as far as the Church of King Charles the Martyr, and further, but a central spot for any kind of display was offered by the open slopes and the magnificent trees, and here I had my first introduction to military life, for one morning a detachment of, I suppose yeomanry, was to gather there for inspection, and everybody flocked to see them. I was mystified, I think, for all I was aware of was a square of khaki clad men obviously on their best behaviour! This was probably the reason why my father went off and bought me a detachment of toy soldiers and a small cannon. However, they were not my favourite toys: I preferred the little paper windmills our housemaid cut out for me and on a breezy day took me to the same area, set them on a rising path, where the wind blew them down hill and I excitedly chased them until they blew into a ditch. It was an improvement on the slow progress round Brighton Lake.

Reproduced from an article by Mrs Mary Cockson-Jones first published in Edition 4 of February 1993

Mrs Edith Mary Cockson-Jones - Bequest.

In the last edition of Common Ground I was able to tell readers of Common Ground of the unexpected bequest of the late Mrs Cockson-Jones who left the "Friends" the sum of £5,000. At that time I did not know very much about Mrs Cockson-Jones, indeed I only knew that she had resided in Malta for a number of years and that she had been a member of the "Friends" in the early days.

With the help of Mrs Goulden and Ms Eyles-Monk I have been able to establish that Mrs Cockson-Jones attended the County School (then in London Road), was active in the teaching of drama at the Technical Institute (the Adult Education Center in Monson Road) and was a founder member of the Friends of the Common. It appears that she had known the Common since the age of six, at which time she came to live in Tunbridge Wells, shortly after the death of Queen Victoria. Our Acting Chairman, Jennifer Blackburn was able to further add to our knowledge by producing three early editions of Common Ground in which articles by Mrs Cockson-Jones appeared. Although living in Malta and quite elderly by that time, it is apparent that she still took a close interest in the Common and clearly had fond memories of it. When, in the last edition, I wrote of her generous bequest, I was unaware that the capital sum had been accumulating interest during the protracted legal formalities following her death. We have since received a further sum of £981 from her solicitors!

As a tribute to the memory of Mrs Cockson-Jones, the first of her three articles has been reproduced in this issue of Common Ground. It is intended to reproduce the other two articles in later editions of Common Ground.

Editor.

Officer & Committee Membership 2003-2004

Officers: (elected annually)

Chair:	Office vacant	
Vice-Chair & Acting Chairman	Jennifer Blackburn	Tel: 546520
Hon. Treasurer:	Cdr. George Lawson	Tel: 524019
Hon. Secretary:	Sylvia Luckhurst	Tel: 526121 Ex. 3251

Committee: (elected for three years)

Dr Ian Beavis	)	Tel: 523007
Mark Dennison	) Elected 21/3/2001	Tel: 528199
Conrad Payne	)	Tel: 513626
Peter Freeman	)	Tel: 524110
Dan Goddard	) Elected 31/3/2002	Tel: 535042
Clr David Wakefield	)	Tel: 523983
Pat Maxwell	) Elected 26/3/2003	Tel: 531968
Jonathan Balcon	)	Tel: 515741

Seconded Member

Rhys Revel Tel 520475

Sub Committee Chairman
Interpretation Panels/signage
Membership
Publicity
Social

Dan Goddard
-
Conrad Payne
-

Note: There is a one vacancy on the Committee

Editorial

Whilst we have a steady membership of around 350 subscribers we have great difficulty in finding enough members to undertake the offices and/or serve on the Committee.

Today, one of the main problems faced by those charged with running any Society is getting members to come forward to help with the organization and eventually take over from them when they have done their stint on the Committee. Several of our Committee (including your editor) are approaching their sell-buy date and we ought to be getting some younger members on to the Committee ready to take over the various offices of the Society so that we can ensure that the work we do for the two Commons can continue. Unfortunately, at present, we do not have any volunteers. I know that members who are still working and commuting find it impractical to take on other outside commitments but we must have some members who are recently retired and who could help with the running of the Society. If the Friends of the Commons are to continue, it is imperative that some of you come forward and do your bit! So what about it? Ring our Secretary Sylvia Luckhurst on 526121 ext 3251 or talk to any of our Committee members listed in this edition of Common Ground.

Another problem faced by our Committee is the difficulty in canvassing the opinion of members who are widely dispersed and whom we see all too rarely. You can help by writing to us and letting us know what you think about matters concerning the Common.

If writing letters is too much of a chore there is always E.Mail which you can use without moving from in front of the computer! Address your letters to "The Editor Common Ground, 70 London Road, Tunbridge Wells, TN1 1DX". Address your E Mail to lawgv7@aol.com and give your message the Subject description of "FOC - Common Ground Feedback". We look forward to hearing from you.

GVL.

Historical and Interesting Views of Tunbridge Wells.

A group of enthusiasts have banded together to produce a historical pictorial record of Tunbridge Wells using old post cards and pictures lent by a variety of contributors. The record which was published in late January 2004 in the form of a CD ROM also contains up to date pictures of over 400 roads in Tunbridge Wells, showing the Borough as it is now. The whole is related to a map of the town and is supported by descriptive text and much other information is included. Over 200 CD ROMs have already been ordered and dispatched, some to addresses as far a field as Germany and the USA. The CD ROM has been very well received and the feed back has been most favourable. The CDs are on sale at £10.00 each and all profits will be donated to a local charity.

If any member is interested in obtaining a copy of this CD please contact the Treasurer on 01892 524019.



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Spa Hotel
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