



# 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 39. Spring 2006

## Diary of Forthcoming Events

### Annual General Meeting

Thursday, 20th April  
2006

7pm for 7:30pm

The Town Hall,  
Royal Tunbridge Wells

### Midsummer Tea Party

Wednesday 21st June,  
2006

3 pm to 5pm

Beacon Hotel,  
Tunbridge Wells Common

Tickets from  
Sylvia Luckhurst  
Tel: 529225

Price: 6 Pounds

All members and guests  
are welcome.



## From the Chairman

Will it ever warm up! In fact it has already even if it doesn't feel like it to us mortals. My Goat Willow is covered with pussy willow almost out; there is lots of frog spawn in the ponds; the dreaded daffodils are ready to burst into yellow along the A264 – I'm sure you can add to the list of imminent Spring happenings!

Some of you may have noticed that there are now three dropped curbs along Coach Road on Rusthall Common. The Friends agreed to fund these in order

to assist crested newts to cross the road in search of new territory without running the risk of falling down the gutters and drowning. This was recommended by the new management plan. It is hoped that they may eventually get as far as the new pond off Tarry Path and start a new colony.

Our Annual General Meeting will be held in the Town Hall on Thursday, 20th April at 7pm. There are two vacancies on the Committee this year as both Peter Freeman and Dan

Goddard have decided to stand down. We thank them both for their years of dedicated attendance at meetings, work parties and other good works. Please consider volunteering to join the Committee. We meet about four times a year on a Sunday evening at 7:30pm at the Spa Hotel. We also need a new editor for this newsletter as announced previously. I look forward to seeing you at the AGM to receive reports and to see and hear Steve Budden's annual slide show of new developments over the year.

Jenny Blackburn

## THE NEW CAR PARK

The new car park under St Helena is now open as members will be aware from the queues of cars waiting in London Road to get in and from the frustration of those inside trying to get out. The effect on the traffic up and down London Road has, of course, been quite remarkable. It was bad already but with the opening of the new car park we have queues stretching three miles back to the junction with the A21 and in the other direction, queues down Frant Road from Forest Road, up Eridge Road from Broadwater Down and along Mount Ephraim from Langton Green.

Of course Highways blame the Friends for all this. It was our opposition – our intense opposition to the original plans

that had some effect on the down-sizing (as they say) of the project. Originally members will recall that there was to be a four lane spur just beyond the crossing of London Road and Church Road leading into the caves under St Helena and Gibraltar Cottage. This four lane spur – two lanes in and two lanes out – was cut down to one lane in and one lane out, thus reducing the amount of Common Land taken.

However, it must be admitted that the end result is not much better. This part of the Common has been ruined, the view from the fine 18th and 19th Century houses in London Road has also been ruined and the foundations of both St Helena and Gibraltar Cottage have been seriously

undermined. Poor Mark and Elaine Dennison! Their day time life is enlivened by the constant rumble of cars, revving up and braking and coming in and out of the car park, whilst the hope of anything but snatches of sleep in the small hours is to be deferred\*. Their compensation under the Commons Destruction Bill of 2007 is ridiculous and the value of their house has been decimated.

Well there it is. So we have another great new landmark in Royal Tunbridge Wells – the Common Car Park. Sic transit Gloria Tunbridge Wellsorum.

Anon.

\* As in "hope deferred maketh the heart sick"

# WARDEN'S REPORT

## AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES ON THE COMMONS



I seem to have spent my entire budget this year, so I am reduced to twiddling my thumbs for a couple of weeks until we are back in funds. Actually, it has been quite handy as we have had three Conservators meetings in three months and there has been a fair amount of organising to do. It has been worth it though, as we now have agreement to run one of the new flail collectors on the Commons this summer. I have mentioned this bit of kit before; it cuts and clears in one operation and can to a degree mimic the effect of grazing. I think it will make a significant difference on our acid-grassland and heathland areas, especially when combined with our bracken control measures.

Many of you will have noticed the clearance of roadside trees along Rusthall and Langton Roads; this is the first phase of a programme to reduce our liability by removing dangerous and potentially dangerous trees from the roadside. Happily, this ties in nicely with the aim of our new management plan which calls for the scalloping and grading of our woodland edges to increase bio-diversity. Now that the immediately threatening trees have been dealt with, the Conservators have agreed a long term plan which would target a specific area each year. By far the worst of the problems occur on Rusthall Road and Langton Road and these will be the areas that we tackle first.

There are finally signs that winter is loosing its grip. The frogs appeared in Fir Tree pond and Cabbage Stalk Lane

pond on March 8th but within a day, the Fir Tree residents decided that they had been fooled and vanished again, whilst the Cabbage Stalk population also vanished within 24 hours but left a substantial amount of spawn behind. This has been subjected to ice and frost and has been left mostly out of the

water by already receding water levels. Frogs in Fir Tree did not re-appear until March 20th, but as I write this there are good numbers of animals present and the traditional spawning area is showing good quantities of eggs. It will be interesting to see which group has the best strategy and it will be interesting to compare the two ponds performance next year. Up to now, Fir Tree has always been the first pond to be visited but obviously the newly recreated Cabbage Stalk pond has the same benefits of shelter from winds and full sun (when there is any). Normally, we re-commence grass cutting in mid March but that too has been delayed this year. However, I don't suppose it will be long before it is underway again. As usual, the moles have made a mess around the Brighton Lake area; it obviously is a good earthworm producing area, and this will need to be cleared. Some parts of the Common, such as this, always look a bit scruffy for the first few cuts, so bear with us.

As the birds start nesting, so we cease our volunteer days. The volunteers have again carried out sterling work this winter, with considerable clearance at Brighton Lake as well as coppicing gorse and removing scrub near Wellington Rocks. Their last foray was adjacent to Fir Tree car park where another clearance has been added to the path between the car park and Bishops Down. This will be finished by chipping all the cut timber and removing stumps in the next few weeks.

Steve Budden

A number of people have told me that they heard on local radio about the first frogs of the year being active at Fir Tree Pond around 8th March. In this late season, they were the first creatures to appear from hibernation, well ahead of the spring emergence of butterflies and mining bees which were still waiting for the first days with both mild temperatures and sunshine. Because of its lack of fish which might eat the tadpoles, Fir Tree Pond is a highly suitable breeding site for frogs. Toads, on the other hand, which also occur on the Commons, often prefer to breed in ponds with a fish population, as their tadpoles are unpalatable to such predators. Toad spawn is less conspicuous than frog spawn, but if it is spotted it can easily be distinguished because it is laid in long strings rather than in clumps. Even very young frogs and toads can readily be distinguished from one another, because toads have a lumpy rather than smooth skin.

As well as frogs and toads, the amphibian fauna of the Commons includes all three of the British species of newt. The two smaller and commoner species are the Smooth Newt and the Palmate Newt. The latter gets its name from the webs of skin between its toes that the male develops during the breeding season. Only the Marl Pits on Rusthall Common provide a home for the rare and impressive Great Crested Newt, which has become something of a nature conservation icon in recent years thanks to its status as a legally protected species. The crest from which this creature gets its more popular name is a feature which the male develops along its back during the spring breeding season to impress potential mates. After breeding is over, the crest begins to be absorbed back into the body, but some traces of it can always be seen. Even non-breeding males and females can be immediately recognised by their large size. They may be up to six inches long, around twice the size of the other British newts.

The most frequently seen reptile on the Commons is the Common Lizard (sometimes called the Viviparous Lizard, because it gives birth to live young rather than laying eggs). Lizards are most often spotted while sunning themselves on patches of bare ground such as ant-hills. They are very alert to possible danger, so sometimes only a glimpse is caught as the creature slips away into the grass or under a bush. There is a second, much more elusive species of lizard on the Commons, but this looks so different that it may not be recognised as such. The Slow-worm is technically a legless lizard, but it could easily be taken for a small brown snake. Looked at more closely, Slow-worms have a very attractive bronze or coppery tint. There is an occasional variety with blue spots, and this has been recorded around Tunbridge Wells.

The commonest of the true snakes on the Commons is the Grass Snake. This species is easily recognised by its olive green colouration and its conspicuous yellow collar. Grass Snakes are very fond of amphibians such as frogs, so they are frequently seen near water. Brighton Lake is a good place to spot them. They swim very effectively by side to side undulations of their body, holding their head above the water surface. Adders too have been recorded on the Commons, but they are much more rarely seen. They are most likely to be spotted while sunning themselves in sheltered spots such as woodland edges. Adders have a very distinctive appearance due to the dark zigzag line along their back which stands out against a lighter greyish or brownish background. As Britain's only venomous snake, they have an unfortunate reputation, but in fact they are shy creatures whose first line of defence if disturbed is to slip away into the undergrowth. So no one should worry about the presence of Adders. They're not a hazard, and the majority of people who use the Commons will never even see one.

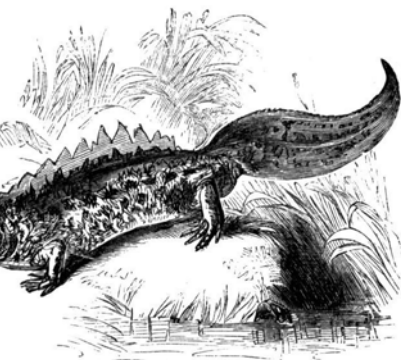
Ian Beavis

## Noteworthy Buildings Facing the Common

*The Beacon Bar and Restaurant, Tea Garden Lane, Rusthall*



Male Common Lizzard



Great Crested Newt



Adder snake

Although the impression of a rather muddy, or even a snow-covered common may be fresher in our minds, recollection of the Friends' Tea Party on a sweltering day last July remain a particularly pleasant memory.

It would be hard to better the Beacon as a venue for such a Tea Party, gastronomically, historically or environmentally. Gastronomically, the Beacon did us proud with a splendid tea. Historically speaking, the site of the Georgian Tea Garden that gives Rusthall Common's Tea Garden Lane its name, seems as appropriate as it is possible to get. And, environmentally, we were able to enjoy the setting of a fine example of Aesthetic Movement architecture, overlooking the famous "Happy Valley".

While Happy Valley Rocks and the Northern edge of Happy Valley itself, form part of Rusthall Common, most of the valley, including the Cold Bath and three lakes, lie within the grounds of the Beacon.

Tunbridge Wells' first historian, Thomas Bengé Burr, tells us that the Cold Bath was built by James Long in 1708 and that it was "equal to any in the kingdom, being plentifully supplied with the finest rock water from the neighbouring hills". Bengé Burr goes on to say that "the Bath was first adorned with amusing water works and embellished with ornaments suitable to the place. In short", he says "the whole work was most completely disposed for a scene of amusement."

John Bowra's map of 1738

shows the Hundred and One Steps leading down from Rusthall Common directly to the Cold Bath, with paths continuing southwards to the three lakes.

However, if given the chance, nature can soon take over and, even by the time that Bengé Burr was writing in 1766, the gardens had become wild. At the fence below the One Hundred Steps, the route now turns eastwards, and follows the old Coach Way in the direction of Tunbridge Wells town centre. Nevertheless, Happy Valley was one of the town's most noted beauty spots in late Victorian times, and is featured in many picture post card views of the area.

The Tea Garden appears to have been established around 1818 and to have continued in use until about 1840.

The present building occupies the site of two cottages that were attached to the Tea Garden, and was built in 1895 for Sir Walter Harris. The architect was Sir Robert Edis, CB, KBE, FRIBA (1839 – 1927),

whose other works include the Ballroom at Sandringham House in Norfolk. In 1881 Edis published a book entitled "Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses" and internal features in the Restaurant at the Beacon include an impressive chimney piece, stained glass and a decorative ceiling. In Victorian times the property came into the hands of Colonel Sladen, sometime Mayor of Royal Tunbridge Wells. Sladen took good care of the grounds, in which he set up the Burmese Bell, brought back by his father Sir Edward Sladen, that now graces the Council Chamber lobby at the Town Hall. During the Second World War the Beacon served as a hostel for Jewish Refugee girls.

As Tunbridge Wells celebrates its fourth centenary in 2006, Happy Valley's Cold Bath and Hundred and One Steps can look forward to their own third centenary in 2008, which could call for an even more special Tea Party.

Philip Whitbourn



## Editorial.

One of the important tasks of a Society such as the “Friends” is that acting as a watch-dog. To oppose and organise resistance to any attempt to annex Common Land for development or road building. Some years ago we successfully fought off just such an attempt. Whilst it was a very worrying time it did have the benefit of sustaining member interest and substantially expanding our total membership. There is nothing like a crisis to concentrate the mind!

The problem for any organisation like the FOC is maintaining interest and sustaining membership when there is no imminent threat to the Commons. It is all too easy to become complacent. I am therefore pleased to include in this edition of Common Ground another light hearted article – a work of fiction entitled “The New Car Park” which I hope will serve to remind us that we must always be on our guard against possible attempts to take Common Land, and the best way to do this is to maintain a strong Society dedicated to its protection and preservation.

On a different tack, I am still looking for a possible successor as Editor. Having achieved the age of 75 I am no longer under guarantee and common sense dictates that I relinquish office in favour of a younger successor. So what about it?

The “Volunteers” have completed another successful winter season of helping in a practical way to maintain and improve our Commons. This winter the Volunteers have directed their efforts to clearing the overgrown path round the back edge of Brighton Lake, the cutting back of gorse to the west of the upper cricket ground and clearing secondary growth from the area immediately behind the Fir Tree Car Park.

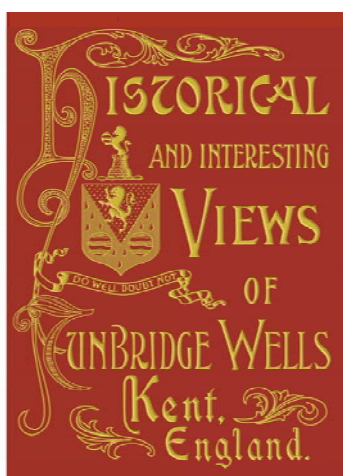
Given the small number of members involved a surprising amount has been achieved.

For those involved it has been both satisfying and enjoyable. We start again in September (the first Saturday – 10.00 am at the Fir Tree Car Park). Why not make a date to join us?

Talking of volunteers – recently, hearing that we need to recruit new members to replace those older members, who for on reason or another cease to be members, a member volunteered to distribute membership brochures in the vicinity of his home. We have already received two applications for membership as a result of this initiative. Is there anyone else willing to help in this way?

Lastly, some members may be wondering what happened to Mrs Groom’s suggestion for celebrating the Tunbridge Wells 400th Anniversary - To erect a group of standing stones. We thought this was a splendid idea and a stone mason was consulted and estimates obtained but, alas, we came unstuck on the health and safety requirements which made the project prohibitively expensive.

GVL



### Historical and Interesting Views of Tunbridge Wells on CD-Rom

This special 400th Anniversary commemorative edition is now available.

It provides an historical pictorial record of Tunbridge Wells, including a contemporary map of Royal Tunbridge Wells which has been edited to give access to:

Over 3,500 images: photographs of the town 2003 - 2005, old pictures as engravings and post cards with historic documentation.

Old maps of Tunbridge Wells with zoom-in feature.

Electronic text of many old books such as Colbran and Pelton.

[www.royaltunbridgewells.org](http://www.royaltunbridgewells.org)

### Officer & Committee Membership 2005-2006

Officers: (elected annually)

Chairman:	Jennifer Blackburn	Tel: 546520
Vice-Chairman:	David Wakefield	Tel: 523983
Hon. Treasurer:	Mark Denison	Tel: 528199
Hon. Secretary:	Sylvia Luckhurst	Tel: 526121 Ex. 3251

Committee: (elected for three years)

Jonathan Balcon	Tel: 515741
Dr Ian Beavis	Tel: 523007
John Davie	Tel: 525557
Peter Freeman	Tel: 524110
Dan Goddard	Tel: 535042
Pat Maxwell (Membership Secretary)	Tel: 521968
Ann Hughes	Tel: 527657
George Lawson (Editor Common Ground)	Tel: 524019



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