



COMMON GROUND

Registered Charity No. 1013975



Warden's Report *with Steve Budden*

We are at that stage of the year when everything is on hold before the clearances of autumn get underway. We have spent the summer carrying out infrastructure maintenance such as path repairs, bench renovation and, of course, grass cutting. We have, with help from the Friends, renovated fifteen benches again this year; some have had their timbers simply turned over before being repainted but others have had new timber put on. We are lucky that one of our main contractors planks up a lot of the trees he cuts down and we are able to get local timber from him at a sensible price.

Although the price of the metal bench ends has risen dramatically in the past few years, we are still able to put a new bench in the ground for £450. I am glad that we are able to keep the prices fairly low because most of the benches installed over the last few years have been donated as memorials. Two more new benches will be going in soon, one of them to commemorate the contribution of Jenny Blackburn who recently stood down after seven years as Chair of the Friends

In the last issue, written in April during the drought, I was thinking that the grass

would not grow much this year and I would have plenty of cuts in the schedule; this, of course, has not been the case. It is now the middle of August and the damp summer has led to me only having three cuts left before the contract is fulfilled, so it is looking as though we will have to fund some extra cuts at the end of year. The plus side to this situation is that the grass seed we sowed in spring has done surprisingly well, particularly at Edgcumbe Rocks. I had almost given up hope when the rain finally arrived, especially at Edgcumbe where we sowed into almost pure sand. I only hope that the heather

seed we imported from Ashdown Forest last year is as successful. At the moment there is very little sign of new heather sprouting, although there are a fair number of gorse seedlings starting to show. However, I have noticed in the past that it takes longer for the heather to appear, so I will be watching with interest over the next few months. Another consequence of the year's bizarre weather has been the excellent crop of rowan berries we have had; the birds are certainly enjoying them. I also notice that the blackberries have already been and gone *continued on back page >>>*

birding journal

by Bettina Cassidy

No.11: Green Woodpecker

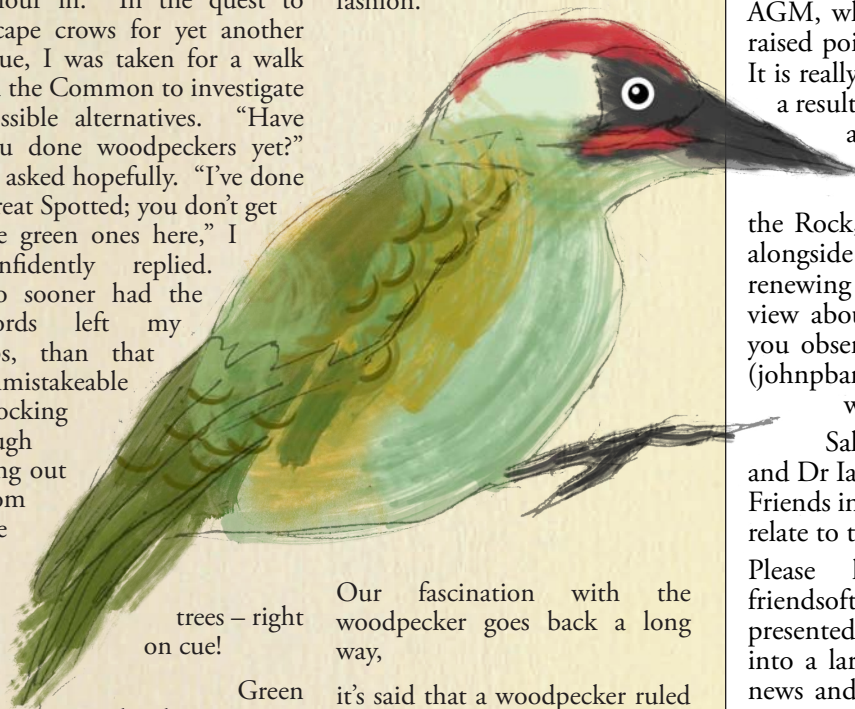
Latin name *Picus viridis*

Size Large, crow-sized

Sound: Loud, shrill, bouncing, laughing keu-keu-keu

I've been threatening the Editor with crows for quite some time, but so far I've been dissuaded on the grounds that they're black, and not very interesting to colour in. In the quest to escape crows for yet another issue, I was taken for a walk on the Common to investigate possible alternatives. "Have you done woodpeckers yet?" he asked hopefully. "I've done Great Spotted; you don't get the green ones here," I confidently replied. No sooner had the words left my lips, than that unmistakeable mocking laugh rang out from the

anthills near Wellington Rocks. But not for long - you're only likely to catch a brief glimpse of his bright yellow rump, swooping for cover into a tree in his characteristic undulating fashion.



trees - right on cue!

Green woodpeckers are one of those species which are more likely to be heard and not seen. A pity, because there are few birds which could claim to match them in the beauty stakes - if you spy an exotic-looking bird and think someone's pet parrot's escaped, chances are it's a green woodpecker. Whoever coined the phrase "red and green should never be seen," obviously wasn't much of an ornithologist.

Unlike all the other woodpecker species, the Green Woodpecker won't be heard drumming on a tree trunk, because he has a comparatively weak beak. He prefers to stay on the ground, stabbing his beak into an anthill, and if you want to find him on the Common, you'll be most likely to spot him lurking around the

Our fascination with the woodpecker goes back a long way,

it's said that a woodpecker ruled the world until Zeus took the sceptre from him. *Picus* - its Latin name - was the ancient god of fertility. In Britain, he has a strong association with our ancient orchards, which is why Bulmer's used his image for their famous cider after it.

Another of our celebrity Green Woodpeckers is, of course, the wonderful Professor Yaffle from Bagpuss. Yaffle is in fact the woodpecker's old English folk name, an onomatopoeic reference to its laughing call. There have been recorded no fewer than 400 Olde English names for the woodpecker, but few have survived down the ages. Some people, however, will still use the term "rainbird", stemming from their supposed ability to bring on rain. This alleged talent is not just limited to our British birds, as the French name *Pluie-pluie-pluie* would suggest. **cg**

Corporate Sponsor

THE SPA HOTEL
ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS ★★★★★

CG NEWS!

NEWS | NEWS | NEWS | NEWS

Words from the Chairman

Balancing the interests around the Commons is incredibly difficult. Fortunately, it is not the Friends that are principally required to display the judgement of Solomon in reconciling competing demands. I say this because in recent months we have seen a number of really tricky matters coming up that relate to the Commons - one person or group's use of the Commons can create difficulties and challenges for others.

It is really encouraging that a number of these were raised at our AGM, which for the first time was held in Rusthall. Friends raised points including about dog fouling, litter, and localism. It is really valuable to have had informed input about these. As a result we are using some of our funds to purchase more bins and dispensers on the Commons. Another example of how our funds are used this year was the clearance around Lion Rock on the Rusthall Common - the Rock, I hope you will agree, looks majestic and the path alongside it is lighter. This year also we are refurbishing and renewing some benches. I would ask any Friend who has a view about what our response to these and other issues that you observe on the Commons should be, please write to me (johnbarber@btinternet.com) so that your views can be shared with the Committee.

Sally Balcon is now representing us on the Town Forum and Dr Ian Beavis is her alternate - they are there to ensure that Friends interests and views are conveyed so make the points that relate to the Commons and you want aired known to us.

Please look at the Friends' website (<http://www.friendsofthecommons.co.uk/>) - it is really well and interestingly presented and widely viewed. We want to translate this interest into a larger membership. You will also find on the website news and correspondence that we may not have room for in Common Ground.

In closing I hope that I can look forward to seeing you firstly at the annual dinner on October 14th and secondly, for the able and willing, the work parties over the coming months. **cg**

Work Party Dates

- 1st October 2011
- 5th November 2011
- 3rd December 2011
- 7th January 2012
- 4th February 2012
- 3rd March 2012

In every case it is the first Saturday of the month.

Corporate Sponsor



THE
ROYAL
WELLS
HOTEL

PIGS ON THE GREEN ANYONE?

By Alex Killick, Friend and Denny Bottom resident

In years gone by ‘pannage’ pigs (domestic pigs kept in a wood, forest, or on common land, in order that they might forage for fallen acorns and the like) were kept on Rushall Common. When I mentioned this to a member of the Friends of the Commons recently she enthusiastically declared: “I think I’d rather like that! Bring back the pigs!”

But should we bring them back to “follow the ways of

their choosing!” (From a poem about pannage pigs, though I can’t remember who by). Should we revive this ancient practice and bring the commons to life once again with the sound of their snorting?

To answer this question perhaps we should look at what happens in the New Forest, where this custom continues to this day. Every year, at about this time, Commoners are allowed to let loose their pigs to clear up fallen acorns and nuts (which are poisonous to the ponies.) Apparently walkers sometimes find their peaceful reverie

disturbed by a stampede of up to a dozen excitable pigs, but this excitement generally passes as quickly as it began.

On a personal note I would like to tell you about an encounter I had recently with a pig (or rather some pigs). I was at a garden party thrown by my partner’s boss and I noticed some pigs (of the rare breed variety) in the field opposite. They were waiting by the fence and I was immediately struck by the intelligence of their gaze, eyeing the guests speculatively as if to ascertain if there were any pig lovers present, who might bring them a treat. So myself and a friend went over and fed them windfall apples. They were very tame, like animals

from a petting zoo, and kept up a companionable grunting all through the encounter (pig small talk?). I have read somewhere that pigs use up to 33 different vocalisations and are really quite chatty! I was so charmed I gave two of them my two favourites names: Beatrice and Eugenie (after the princesses of the same name). Afterwards they gambled away, one seeming to be chasing a butterfly. So, I don’t know about you, but I am definitely a convert. As Winston Churchill once said: “A dog looks up to you. Cats look down on you. Give me a pig. He just looks you in the eye and treats you like an equal.”

I rest my case. **cg**

flora & fauna by Ian Beavis Grasshoppers and Crickets

Late summer is the peak period for seeing – and in some cases hearing – grasshoppers and crickets. We regularly find them on our Museum mini-beast safaris in August, and the question always asked is how to tell the difference between the two. The answer is easy: grasshoppers have short

them live in grass or other low vegetation, with the exception of the pale green Oak Bush-cricket. This lives high up in trees and is rarely seen unless it gets blown down or is attracted to lights at night. Grasshoppers and some crickets can be recognised by their characteristic songs, made by rubbing their hind legs against their wings, and used by the two sexes to communicate with each other while remaining camouflaged among foliage. The easiest song to pick out is the monotonous chirp of the Field Grasshopper, while its relatives the Meadow Grasshopper and Common Green Grasshopper have a more complex song that starts softly, builds in volume and suddenly cuts off.

Each of these three grasshopper species is found in a bewildering variety of colours. They can be various shades of brown, green or



Dark Bush-cricket

even purple, or any combination of these. All are useful for camouflage, and clearly none has an overriding competitive advantage, so all coexist in the gene pool. To identify grasshoppers, it is necessary to ignore the colour and focus on structural features. Field Grasshoppers have abundant white hairs on the underside, clearly visible in profile, and long wings. Common Green Grasshoppers also have long wings but lack the hairs. Meadow Grasshoppers have wings that are clearly shorter than the body, less than half its

length in the case of the female.

Crickets are much less variable. The Oak Bush-cricket is one of two fully winged species, the other being the wonderfully named Long-winged Conehead, easily recognised by its pointed head. This used to be a rare species of wetlands, but in recent years it has spread much more widely.



Oak Bush-cricket

Roesel’s Bush-cricket is also much commoner than it was, and is characterised by a bright yellow or green U shape on the side of its body, contrasting with a darker background. The remaining species have always been widespread. These are the large dull brown Dark Bush-cricket and the smaller Speckled Bush-cricket, which is green but peppered with innumerable tiny black specks. **cg**



Long-winged Conehead

antennae, much shorter than the body, while crickets have very long, thread-like antennae.

There are three species of grasshoppers and five crickets found on the Commons. All of

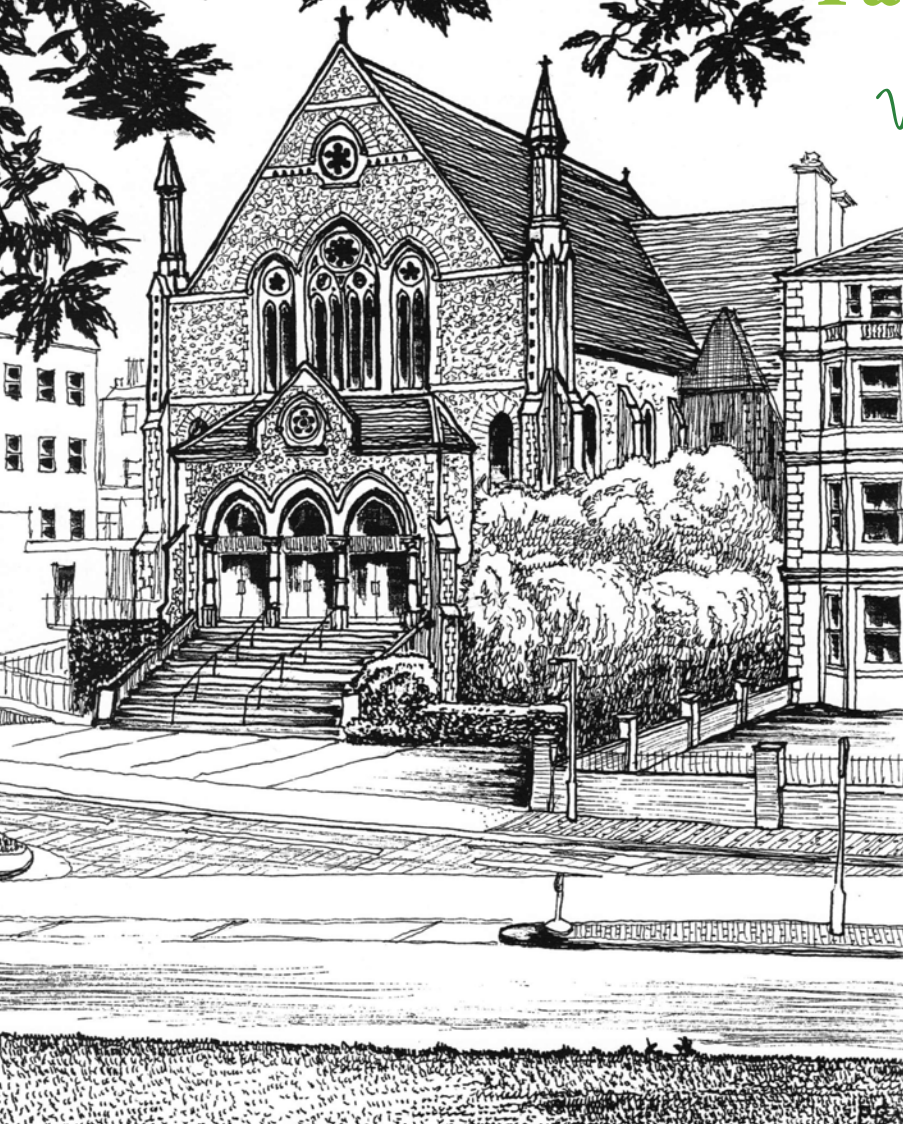


Meadow Grasshopper

NOTEWORTHY BUILDINGS

Facing The Common

by Philip Whitbourn
Vale Royal Methodist Church



Much consternation was caused recently, by an application to demolish Vale Royal Methodist Church in London Road, and to build a five-storied angular modern block in its place, incorporating fourteen flats above a new place of worship.

The church was built in 1878 by the well-known local firm of Willicombe and Oakley, to the design of the London architect Charles Bell. The building is in an early Gothic style and is faced with Kentish rag-stone, with Bath stone dressings and shafts of granite.

When the scheme was turned down, a person from the church was reported to have commented that it was not as though they were wanting to knock down Westminster Abbey. That, however, is not at all the point. If Westminster Abbey was to be taken as the benchmark for meriting conservation, then few historic buildings would survive in Kent. Canterbury Cathedral perhaps, but not much else.

we are fortunate in having a number of Georgian, and more especially Victorian, buildings which, although sometimes relatively modest in themselves, add up to a historic town of great character, where the whole exceeds the sum of the parts. Nowhere is this more true than in the sequence of older buildings facing our commons.

Vale Royal Methodist Church is included in the Local List of Heritage Assets within the Royal Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Conservation Areas. In our town of Tunbridge Wells, two former Congregational Churches provide commendable examples of adaptation for new uses. One in Mount Pleasant for commercial use, and the other in Albion Road for residential use.

The Kentish town of Dover boasts a noble castle, and Maidstone an Archbishops Palace. Nevertheless, in terms of historic townscape, they are both now examples of places where the whole adds up to less than the sum of the parts. In Royal Tunbridge Wells the reverse is true. Here

It would be good if that kind of approach could be explored at Vale Royal, where the old schoolroom beneath, might offer scope for the provision of a smaller continuing place of worship, if desired. **cg**

<<< *continued from front page* and in several places I am seeing good numbers of field mushrooms; most unusual in August.

At the beginning of September we will be bringing on the collector flail again to cut and clear our large open areas and the edges of the major paths and

the Racecourse. Each year this machine is doing a little more as it takes less time to clear the areas that have been under maintenance for a few years. It is a good indication that the nutrient levels are dropping on those sites. We will also be clearing the big bank between Mt Ephraim and London Rd again but that has to be

done with strimmers and an Alan scythe and then raked off and picked up by hand. Whilst all that is going on, we will also have the small flail in action cutting back the smaller paths and tracks where the big tractor can't go.

September is always a lovely month and it is a pleasure to be out at this time of year.

This September there will be an unusual sight on the Common with a pantomime horse race on the Lower Cricket Pitch on the day of the Hospice in the Weald fun run on 18th of September. Don't miss it. **cg**