

'Common Ground'

The Newsletter for Staff & Volunteers

Welcome to the thirteenth edition of Common Ground.



As we move steadily into a brand new decade, this edition of Common Ground has the happy task of highlighting just some of the activities that have taken place on the Commons over the past few months.

Over the course of the next 26 pages, there will be the customary updates provided by the Commons' Maintenance Team and the Commons' Mounted Keepers as well as news on volunteering, wildlife and conservation, our photograph of the month, a slice of Commons' history and 'Snakes alive!', the discovery of a pit of vipers on the Commons. (Please note: there may be a slight degree of artistic license surrounding the pit of vipers story).

The Rain on The Plain (photographed towards the end of 2019)



Keepers Activities October to January 2019

(Written by Richard Thompson: Head Keeper)

In October's monthly Keepers' report I wrote "October has been a really wet month, with the Commons getting some much needed rain". Well it hasn't stopped raining since!!

During November, another wet month, the keepers continued to carry out directed patrols in support of the Commons' dog campaign. We had a notable success which really demonstrates the value of the task driven patrols. A good example of this followed a report of a person bitten by a dog in the Caesars Well area of the Commons. The team were tasked to patrol the area to try and locate the offending dog. A few days later K1 and K6 came across two dogs that fitted the description given. The owner's details were taken and the owner was cautioned about having his dogs under control. He was extremely sorry about what had happened and his details were passed on to the Rangers Office, to liaise with the victim. This is a good example of how the keepers are now increasingly operating, using information and intelligence gained from reported incidents.

During November all the Keepers completed the level two Conflict Management Training. I am pleased to report that all of the team passed the exam with exceptionally high scores. Well done to all of them. The trainer was very impressed with their depth of experience and willingness to examine new ways of dealing with people in challenging situations. We are planning to develop this training further to enhance the professionalism of the team.

December saw a continuation of the extremely wet and mild weather. The Commons are very wet making it difficult for cyclist and dog walkers to use. Hence there was a marked reduction in the numbers of recorded incidents over the month.

We did have two notable incidents over Christmas and the New Year involving two men sleeping rough on the Commons needing urgent help. I am extremely proud of the help that we gave to both of these unfortunate people, both who had fallen on rough times. Both individuals displayed signs of hyperthermia and one gentleman was an 82-year-old missing person from Lewisham, reported missing since the 24th December. We found him on Boxing Day lying in a ditch, soaked to the skin and covered in mud and he had been outside for at least 48 hours.

We welcome the New Year, with plans to develop our patrol taskings further. To build on the successes we have had during 2019, with Operation Hot Chocolate and the Dog Campaign. We are planning to have monthly taskings to target what we see as problems on the Commons. These plans rely on good information and to that end we are looking to introduce a better reporting and recording system so that all information is retained and can be utilized to develop meaningful intelligence led patrols and taskings.



K1 patrolling with Ted on Putney Heath.



Keeper 2 taking a break from patrolling the Commons in order to give Hector a spot of additional exercise in the paddock.



All part of a day's work... K2 outlining the role of the Commons' mounted Keepers during one of our recent organized walks on the Commons.

The Maintenance Team

(Written by J. Rowland: Maintenance Manager)

The list of jobs that are tackled by the Commons' Maintenance Team is extremely long and basically, unending.

With regards to the most up to date WPCC Maintenance work list, which covers the period from January to the end of March 2020, there are 23 separate headings with jobs that include woodland work, heathland work, pond work, tree safety work, drainage work, pathway and horse ride repairs, heavy mowing, positioning new benches and bins and the creation of dams at Farm Bog.

As much of this work list is currently in progress, unfortunately, we'll have to wait until the next edition (Number 14) of Common Ground is circulated in the spring but needless to say, over the past few months, the Maintenance Team has remained as busy as ever.



Horse ride repair work being carried out by the Maintenance Team

October 2019:

As a result of prolonged and heavy rainfall, a great deal of attention was spent during October on carrying out much needed repairs to horse rides and footpaths. This included a substantial programme of work being carried out along the northern section of Ladies Mile near Kingsmere, where sustained rainfall had caused flooding and serious damage to an already muddy major route on the Commons.

On this particular site, the work carried out by the Maintenance Team was designed to help increase the level of natural light that reaches this heavily shaded section of ground. The work involved carrying out a programme of selected tree thinning and tree safety work along the adjacent woodland edges, as well as the dredging of existing drainage ditches and the creation of a new network of drainage ditches and pipes around the area to help transfer water away from the twin pathways. Finally, both the footpath and parallel horse ride/cycle track were built up and resurfaced with a camber to help prevent severe flooding from affecting this area again in the future.



Day 1 of repair work along the flooded section of Ladies Mile.

Additional projects that were carried out by the Maintenance Team during October and November 2019 included the high pressure washing of all four of the Commons war memorials as well as the deep cleaning of Hartley's Obelisk which can be found along the edge of the A3 near Tibbet's roundabout and the cleaning of the metropolitan horse trough which is located near to the Commons' Nature Trail.

This work was carried out using the Commons' water bowser which was purchased during 2019. Although predominantly designed as a piece of fire-fighting equipment for emergency use during the summer, this machine has become a great mobile tool for cleaning tasks like this.



Phil Crainey cleaning the Tangier Stone on Putney Heath.

November 2019

During November 2019, one of the largest tasks that was carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team involved the felling of dangerous and unstable Poplar trees along Friar's Avenue.

In total, 23 Lombardy Poplar trees were felled as a result of substantial decay being found in the lower stems of the trees by our independent tree assessor.

The tree work consisted of straight felling work and where necessary, more problematic trees were felled in sections by the team using the Commons' Mobile Elevation Working Platform.

The trees were then left as waist height stumps with the view that they will re-coppice in the future and help to maintain a natural wild hedge line along with the other tree species that are already established along this line of trees.



Tree work being carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team along the edge of the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields.

December 2019 & January 2020

Heathland Management:

Throughout the year, the Commons' heathland is managed in a variety of ways which can include the creation of bare ground, Bracken control, Gorse management, scrub clearance, the periodic cutting of Heather and the establishment of fire breaks. While much of the scrub bashing is carried out on a regular basis by the Commons' volunteer groups, certain tasks inevitably require the involvement of heavy machinery and this work is carried out by the Commons Maintenance Team.

In accordance with the Commons' Countryside Stewardship agreement with Natural England, there is a requirement to carry out tree thinning work around certain areas of heathland which will either help to increase the area of open heathland on the Commons or provide a more natural edge to the surrounding woodland. During December 2019 and the early part of January 2020, the largest piece of heathland work that was carried out by the Maintenance Team was located close to Jubilee Path. As a result of this work, a substantial area of heathland has been reclaimed from invasive tree cover but in order to prevent this area from once again becoming overrun by a mixture of bramble, bracken and scrub ongoing work will need to be carried out in the future.



Heathland work being carried out near Jubilee Path.

Volunteering on the Commons

Over the past few months, volunteers have continued to play a huge part in the day to day management of the Commons

With activities such as litter picking, scrub bashing, woodland coppicing, wildlife surveying, leading and supporting guided walks and helping with administration duties, the smooth running of the Commons is greatly assisted by all of the many activities that are carried out by the Commons' volunteers.

Litter picking:

Despite the wet and windy weather, over the past few months, huge numbers of people have continued to visit the Commons and unfortunately, litter has continued to be left behind.



Litter pickers from a local business helping to litter pick on Putney Heath towards the end of November 2019

In addition to the Commons' regular litter pickers and the occasional organised litter picks which are carried out by local societies and organisations, another group of volunteers who regularly help to keep the Commons clear of litter are the numerous young people who volunteer as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes. Since the beginning of 2019, we have had 47 DofE volunteers help out on the Commons and although the majority of these individuals have been involved with the Bronze Level (12 hours volunteering), there have also been a small number of others who have completed their Silver and Gold Awards.



Every little bit helps...

Scrub bashing

Over the course of past few months, the Commons' Saturday morning scrub bashers have continued to *fight the good fight* against invasive scrub that has steadily encroached upon an area of heathland which is located along the northern section of Ladies Mile. While a fantastic all-round effort has been made by everyone involved, on this occasion, I would like to pass on a particular word of thanks to Rosy and Stephen for spending at least three sessions cutting back unwanted vegetation from a muddy and bramble covered ditch which was uninviting to say the least.



The ditch.....



Scrub bashing along Ladies Mile during January 2020

Mid-week Volunteer Estate Team

The Commons' mid-week Volunteer Estate Team meet up every three weeks on a Wednesday morning and basically get involved in a whole range of activities including painting, litter picking and conservation activities.

With similarities to the Commons' Saturday morning scrub bashers, during the beginning of 2020, this intrepid group of individuals have also been spending some good quality time in and around one of the Commons net-work of muddy ditches.

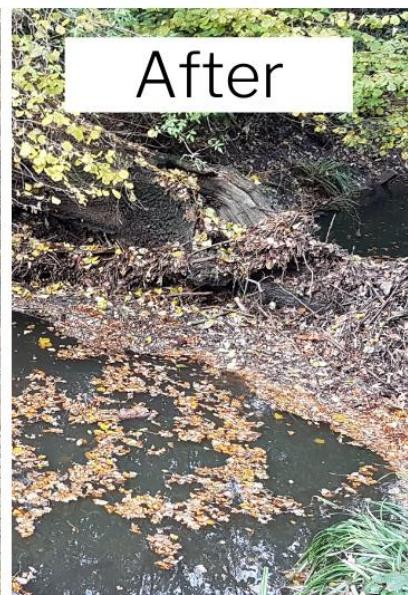
For this group, the activity has been to continue hazel coppicing in the woodland near Upper Gravelly Ride and with the aid of some very tasty biscuits, good progress has been made.



Woodland coppicing near Upper Gravelly Ride.

Volunteering along the Beverley Brook

Apart from the regular visits that are made by the Commons Maintenance Team, towards the end of 2019, a large volunteer litter picking event was organised by the South East Rivers Trust along the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common. The event involved 29 volunteers and as usual, a huge amount of assorted items of litter were removed.



South East Rivers Trust Litter Pick: 2019

Wildlife News:

Snakes Alive!

At the beginning of this edition of Common Ground, it was claimed that a pit of vipers was recently discovered on the Commons. Well, allowing for a bit of artistic license and the fact that one of the snakes was found in October 2019 and the other snake was found in January 2020, the fact remains that two non-native snakes have recently been found on the Commons and both were found in roughly the same area of the Commons.

The Corn snake (*Pantherophis guttatus*) is a North American species of rat snake that kills its prey by constriction. Although they may bite under stress, they are not venomous. As a result of their size, calm temperament and ease of care, the Corn snake is believed to be world's most popular species of pet snake.

Whether they have escaped from their owners or whether they have been intentionally released, over the past few years, three Corn snakes have been found on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath and all of them have been re-homed with a local reptile rescue group.



Corn snake found on the Commons' during October 2019



Tree surgeon, snake charmer and part time burlesque performer, Joe with the Corn snake found on the Commons during January 2020

Owl boxes:

Although we invest a great deal of time on the Commons ensuring that our various habitats are both protected and enhanced, installing bird boxes is not something that we have done too much of in the past.

While there are a few examples such as on Putney Lower Common and on the Commons' Nature Trail where tit boxes have been installed and on the heathland where a Kestrel nesting box was installed during 2019, in general, we prefer to leave the Commons in the most 'natural' state as possible.



Tit box on Putney Lower Common

This said, we have recently installed three large nesting boxes that have been specifically designed for use by Tawny owls.

Although resident on the Commons and regarded as a widespread breeding species in England, Wales and Scotland, in 2015, the Tawny owl was moved to the Amber List of Birds of Conservation because of concerns that it may be undergoing a long-term population decline.

While established pairs of Tawny owls will remain on their breeding territories throughout the year and are strongly territorial, this species requires suitable tree cavities or nest boxes for breeding and therefore may be limited by their availability.

For this reason, we decided to try and help out with the ongoing protection of this amazing species by installing two owl boxes on Putney Lower Common and one box on the Nature Trail on Wimbledon Common. Boosting great eco-friendly credentials, the Tawny owl nesting boxes that we have sourced have been designed and made in the United Kingdom using recycled plastic and waste wood. The material used for the wooden nesting chamber has been sourced from waste forestry materials and the outer shell is made from recycled plastic, much of which has been collected from British farms rather than go to landfill. The outer shell is weatherproof with an expected lifespan of at least 20 years.





Tawny Owl photographed on Wimbledon Common by Dave Wills

Latest Bird Sightings: November to December 2019 (Adrian Podmore)

Cormorant: 10 at Kingsmere 16th November (TS)

Shoveler: 5 at Kingsmere 12th November (AP) with a max of 8 seen on 19th December (JR)

Woodcock: single birds flushed along Warren Farm Ride 4th December (R.A) and Ladies Mile 14th December (LEH).

Snipe: 1 flushed along Ladies Mile 26th December (LEH)

Buzzard: 2 regularly seen in the woods between Gravel Pit Cottage and Kingsmere (AEH)

Short-Eared Owl: 1 north of Windmill Ride North 17th November

Firecrest: 1 at Paradise (North of REMPF war memorial) 4th December (J.M)

Fieldfare: 1 at Ladies Mile 19th December (JR)

Redwing: very quiet with max of 10 seen around The Plain on 15th December (AP)

Bullfinch: a female seen at the Mounds November 16th (TS)

Reed Bunting: 3 at Ladies Mile 4th November (JR), 4 seen at the same location 2nd December (JR) and 3 again 28th December (JR)

One from the archives.....

Lucky Jim does his last milk round

It's safe to say that Wimbledon and Putney Commons have had a long and colourful history of horse related activities taking place on this site. From military reviews, gymkhanas, use by local riding stables and of course the continued presence of the Commons' own mounted keepers, horses have remained a very visible part of this very special area of London's countryside.

One story that we have managed to unearth from our archives harks back to a London that has long passed by but it is definitely a story that deserves a place in this edition of Common Ground.

On 26th March 1959, the Commons received a horse called Jimmy which was the last of the Express Dairy horses. Featured in the Wimbledon Borough News, the story stated that despite the prospect of starting a new life on the Commons, 'Lucky Jim did not want to retire and dug his hooves in refusing to leave his former home at the Express Dairy's distribution depot in Morden.

According to the story "In spite of all their efforts no progress was made at all until Jimmy's old milk float bridle and blinkers were strapped on. This gave the milk horse a little confidence and eventually the seven people involved managed to shove him into his horse box." It was the end of an era.

For nearly 100 years the Express Dairy milk horses had pulled their floats down London streets only to be replaced by electric vans. At the handover ceremony, Mr. Ball, the managing director of the company explained that traffic had become so heavy that it was no longer humane to keep horses on the roads.

Collecting Jimmy for the Commons was Colonel Whitehead (Clerk & Ranger) who explained that "Jimmy is to do something we all hope to do in this matter of retirement. He has got a home in the country and found a light, useful and interesting job. While on the Commons, Jimmy will be doing a little cart work and pulling the Ranger's buggy."



Jimmy being collected from the Express Dairy depot in Morden in 1959 by Colonel Whitehead (Clerk & Ranger), Wimbledon and Putney Commons.

Photograph(s) of the month...

According to Napoleon Bonaparte, "an army marches on its stomach" and for this reason, on the Commons we like to ensure that our staff are provided with the adequate resources to keep well fuelled for the day ahead.

As part of the recent refurbishment of the Maintenance Centre along Camp Road, a new kitchen was installed by the Commons' Property Maintenance Officer, Jim Hutchings, and as the photograph beneath testifies, the team are well pleased with the results.



Christmas dinner at the Maintenance Centre: 2019

Having grown used to their new and improved culinary surroundings, the team are also looking at various ideas of how to update their mess room in a way that is more suited to their new found tastes...



Perhaps the future of lunchtime at the Maintenance Centre???

As always, a great big thank you to everyone who has helped out on the Commons over the past few months and a huge thanks to everybody who has either contributed information or photographs for this edition of Common Ground.

