



Swans on Queensmere

For the first time in living memory a pair of mute swans nested and successfully reared young on Wimbledon Common. Although swans regularly visit the Commons it is only the Rushmere and Queensmere ponds that seem to attract them. Unfortunately both ponds offer little in the way of cover or suitable nesting material. Therefore it was a surprise when in early April 2007 a female (pen) was seen depositing an egg on the hard gravel surface of the south bank of Queensmere.

The Conservators' staff decided that perhaps with a little encouragement she might go on to lay more eggs. A hastily erected fence was placed around the site of her egg and sections of straw were strewn around the inside of the enclosure. Within a matter of hours both swans were observed moving pieces of straw and fashioning a very crude nest.

The swans were monitored on a daily basis and fresh straw was regularly made available. As the structure grew we noted that the female was spending increasingly long periods on the nest. By late April we were excited when we counted a total of six eggs. With an average 42 day incubation period it was not until early June that we saw the first cygnet struggle from the egg. This was soon followed by a further four cygnets leaving just one egg failing to hatch. In the trees above the brood, the Carrion Crows gathered. Theirs was a waiting game, waiting for one of the young birds to stray just far enough from the parents' protection to be seized. And this opportunity presented itself just a few days after hatching, when, despite the parents' vigilance, a crow struck, stabbing the cygnet with its powerful beak and attempting to fly off with it. The parents came to its rescue but sadly too late for the cygnet and it died a few hours later from its wounds.

Miraculously the four remaining cygnets survived the vulnerable first few weeks and continued to prosper. A daily food supplement of mixed corn was added to their natural diet of grass, pond weeds and invertebrates. They were also



*Family of Mute Swans
on Queensmere*

offered bread by local children, which filled them but also made them unafraid of humans.....not always a good thing.

For the following three months the swans enjoyed celebrity status as word spread. Parents and children regularly visited and passed on their observations and concerns to the Ranger's Office. In response we posted regular bulletins to keep the public informed. Throughout the cygnets' development we monitored the birds twice daily and sought advice from London Wildcare when on two occasions an adult swan lost wing feathers when attacked by dogs.

On the 28 October 2007 information was received at the Ranger's Office reporting the disappearance of one of the adult swans. At first we thought the bird may have retired to some quiet area but on the following day we instructed the Keepers to search the surrounding woodland. Our hope for a simple answer was dashed when a crossbow bolt was found in the pond. The search was widened and some 300 metres west of the pond Keepers found part of a wing, a leg and a number of small white feathers. Despite an intensive search of the area nothing else was found.

An adult male swan (cob) weighs approximately 10-12kg and as we have no scavengers capable of dragging the bird any distance an animal attack had to be ruled out. A predator would also leave signs of a struggle but none were found, which led us to conclude that the bird was killed and removed by a person or persons. If it was destined for the table it is likely that the wings, head and legs would have been removed to reduce the weight. It would also appear that this was not an isolated incident as several swans had, at that time, disappeared from ponds in the Wandsworth and Merton areas. Concerned that the other swans might also disappear we arranged for London Wildcare to capture the birds and remove them to a safe place. This was carried out over three days and the four cygnets and their mother were taken to the safety of Kingston Lock.

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators

ANNUAL OPEN MEETING

Wednesday 11 June at 8 pm
Christ Church Hall, Cottenham Park Road,
SW20 0HG

Presentation of annual accounts and report

There will be a general discussion on any points
you wish to raise.

Refreshments will be served after the meeting.

New Byelaws for Dog-Walkers

Since the Foot & Mouth epidemic several years ago, when Richmond Park was temporarily closed to dog-walkers, the number of dog-walkers on Wimbledon and Putney Commons has increased dramatically. Add to that the fact that the Commons are currently the only green space in south west London where dog-walkers are not required to pick up after their dogs and you can see that dogs and their faeces start to become something of a problem.

In an effort to deal with the problem of dog-waste, and an increasing number of incidents involving ill-disciplined dogs, the Conservators are introducing three new byelaws relating to dogs and their owners/walkers. The new byelaws will give the Conservators the following powers:

1. To designate all or part of the Commons as areas where dog faeces must be picked up;
2. To designate any part or parts of the Commons as areas where dogs must be excluded for the protection of flora, fauna or wildlife within those areas;
3. To allow the Commons' Keepers to order any person in charge of a dog to put that dog on a lead if they believe that the dog is being a nuisance or may endanger another member of the public.

These new byelaws will bring the Commons into line with other green spaces in the area.

REMPF - Sports Facilities

Within the boundaries of the Commons are 46 acres (18.6 hectares) of playing fields at the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields (REMPF), which adjoin the westbound A3 at Roehampton Vale. The playing fields have been used for many years for rugby and football. They used to be the training ground for Wimbledon Football Club and are the current training ground for the Harlequins Rugby Union and League clubs, and also the home ground for the London Cornish Rugby Club. The football pitches have been used for many years by teams for local league football.

One of the largest events that the REMPF hosts is the annual Schoolboy Rugby Sevens Tournament held in March but, over the past four years, the Clerk & Ranger, Chief Executive, Gordon Vincent, has encouraged diversity in the number and types of sports played at the REMPF and the fields are now in use all through the year.

Every summer we lay out a cricket pitch which can be hired by clubs or for private games for the day or part day. May to September sees the season for Australian Rules Football and for the first time ever REMPF was the host for the 2007 Great Britain Ultimate Frisbee Championships. In 2008, we will host the European Ultimate Frisbee Championships. Our canine

Wimbledon Common Stables Open Day

**Come along to the Annual Stables Open Day
on Sunday 13 July 2008 from 11am at
The Ranger's Office, Windmill Road, SW19 5NR**

A GREAT DAY OUT FOR ALL THE FAMILY!

- * Farm Animals
- * Birds of Prey
- * Tractor Rides
- * Horse displays
- * The Wacky Dog Show!

Commons Stalwart Retires

David Haldane, our Wildlife Liaison Officer, retired in February this year. David had worked on the Commons for nearly 38 years and, during that time, had acquired an enviable knowledge of the Commons, their history and, in particular, their flora and fauna. David began his working life on the Commons as a Mounted Keeper and promotion to Senior Keeper soon followed. When an injury forced him to stop riding, David forged a role for himself as Wildlife Liaison Officer. If it lives and breathes on the Common, David could tell you all about it!

His knowledge will be sorely missed but his role has been taken over by his son, Peter Haldane, and much of what David has learnt has been passed on to him. Peter has lived all his life on the Commons and has been working with David over the last few years learning the ropes. We wish David well in his retirement and congratulate Peter on his new role as Wildlife & Conservation Officer.



Peter and David Haldane

companions are also getting in on the action as a new Flyball club was set up there earlier this year.

The hard work of the Head Groundsman, Ian Osbon, and his team, John Newman and John Madden, mean that the pitches are always in first class condition and many compliments are received from those who use them. There are also changing rooms available and ample car parking for visitors. The Playing Fields are also conveniently situated alongside the A3 just 20 minutes from the M25 and central London. If you are a member of a club or team that could make use of the facilities at REMPF, please contact the Clerk & Ranger, Chief Executive, Gordon Vincent, by e-mail at gordon@wpcc.org.uk to discuss your requirements.

*Ultimate Frisbee at
the REMPF in 2007*



Election 2009 - Do you have the skills to stand as a Conservator?

Next February there will be an election for Conservators. Under the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act 1871, which governs the operation and the management of the Commons, five Conservators are elected every three years by the local electorate, i.e. everyone living within the "levying area" - within 3/4 of a mile of the Commons or within the old parish of Putney.

Three further Conservators are appointed every three years by respective Secretaries of State, i.e. the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for the Environment. These appointed Conservators represent the broader interest of the Commons outside the levying area and provide continuity if none of the current Conservators are re-elected.

The election is by postal ballot conducted by Electoral Reform Services, and generally the electorate receive their ballot papers about three weeks before the election date. These papers include a ballot paper, a short biography and photograph of each candidate, instructions on how to vote and a pre-paid envelope for returning the ballot paper. Despite the ease of voting, the proportion of the electorate which does vote is low; at the last election in 2006 it was only 21%.

The 1871 Act allows any elected Conservator to stand for re-election. There is a tendency for such Conservators to be re-elected. This could be taken as approval of the way the Conservators govern the Commons, or it may be because voters only vote for familiar faces. However, this does not explain why only about one fifth of the electorate actually vote. All the current Conservators believe that it is in the interest of the Commons for as many people as possible to vote. Let us hope that the 2009 election will set a new trend.

It is not clear how many of the current elected Conservators will be re-standing at the next election, but anyone thinking of

standing should bear in mind that, although being a Conservator is not particularly arduous, it does require a high degree of commitment. Protecting the Commons is not just about "birds, butterflies and trees." With an annual budget of over £1million, considerable business skills are required. Anyone attending the monthly Board meetings, which are open to the public, will quickly realise that the range of topics covered is vast and includes natural history, finance, administration, security, legal issues and planning issues. It is of considerable advantage if a Conservator can bring knowledge and experience in one or more of these fields to the Board. To see how these issues crop up it is only necessary to peruse the minutes of the Conservators' monthly Board meetings; these minutes are available in all the public libraries within the levying area. Better still, come to some of the monthly Board meetings. They are held at 5 pm on the second Monday of each month at the Information Centre, which is opposite the Ranger's Office at Manor Cottage. The Chairman is generally there from 4:30 pm to answer questions from members of the public. The public can observe the Board meetings but are not permitted to speak - although you might be offered a cup of tea!

Alternatively, any of the Conservators can be contacted via the Office (details at the end of this newsletter), and they will be able to fill you in on the responsibilities of being a Conservator. If you have the requisite skills and business experience do consider standing. It is a very interesting and worth-while job.

Heathland Clearance

Lowland heath has been identified as a National Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitat. With an estimated 84% of lowland heath having been lost since the beginning of the 19th century, steps have been taken, both nationally and locally, to arrest further decline.

Wimbledon and Putney Commons includes the largest heathland site in the Greater London Region with over 240 acres (100 hectares) of wet and dry heath. It is recognised as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation, with a commitment to preserving not only its heath but also 100 ha of acid grassland, 250 ha of woodland and 10 ha of ponds and bogs.

Our heathland is a relic from the days of grazing on the Commons. Sadly this practice no longer occurs, so we have to look to other means of keeping down trees and shrubs. Since 2006, the Conservators, under a stewardship agreement with Natural England, have pursued a policy of scrub clearance on the heath. Birch, aspen and oak scrub are being tackled and the stumps treated. Smaller scrub is hand pulled using volunteer groups.

Removing the trees reduces the amount of seed being dispersed and the huge quantity of leaves deposited each autumn which otherwise slowly release nutrients and increase soil fertility. By reducing the nutrient input, heathland plants, which require acid soil with a pH range of between 3.5 and 5.5, will benefit. All management is sensitively carried out taking into account the habitat requirements of resident and visiting wildlife.

Without active management the heath and other open habitats would be lost and replaced by scrub and woodland. The heather and associated plants, together with the wildlife they support, would disappear, possibly forever, and with it the character and charm that makes Wimbledon and Putney Commons such a unique site.

Building Works on The Commons

It was bad news when the Conservators were forced into parting with the property known as Mill House last year but the money that they received in compensation has provided a useful reserve fund that can be used for capital projects such as building work. That is how the new office at Manor Cottage came to be constructed at no expense to the Commons' levypayers. People who visited the office in the past will remember it as a single room housing three members of staff, packed with desks and office equipment. Now both staff and visitors have room to breathe. An adjoining stable building that was used for storage has been rebuilt to form a new office with staff facilities and storage space for documents and archives. It has a glazed link to the old office which has now become an office for the Clerk & Ranger, Chief Executive and a more spacious reception area.

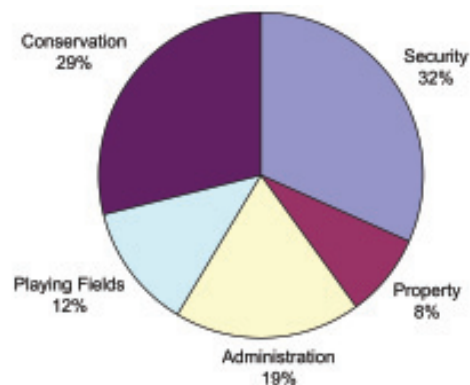
Another project that is under way is the construction of two new houses for Keepers on a strip of land owned by the Conservators at Stag Lane. Again this work will be entirely funded from the reserve fund and there will be no cost to the Commons' levypayers.



The new Ranger's Office

Commons Finances 2007 - 2008

The financial position at the year end remains strong, with a small surplus on the general fund. On the capital side, the rebuilding of the office at Manor Cottage was paid for from the special fund established as a result of the enforced sale of Mill House, which will also be used for the new cottages being built at Stag Lane. Staff salaries remain the largest item of expenditure and are met from the Levy. During the year, an independent review revealed that in many cases pay had fallen below the rates for comparable employment elsewhere. As a result, a pay settlement was agreed by the Conservators which gives most of the staff increases in excess of inflation. To pay for this the Levy is being increased to the permitted maximum in 2008-2009, which means that a Band D property will pay £23.32, compared with £22.40 in 2007-08.



Chairman's Report

The redevelopment of the old stables building at Manor Cottage into new office accommodation was completed in the autumn and the old office was also renovated. Not only are staff working conditions much improved, but there is now a public reception area where sales material such as postcards, maps, notelets etc can be displayed. The extra space has meant that all the archive files could be stored in the Office and this has freed up space to provide the Keepers with a reasonably sized tack room instead of their previous "box room".

A most generous donation of £50,000 spread over five years has enabled us to embark on a professional assessment and reorganisation of our archives, which go back over 130 years. A qualified archivist has completed an initial survey and has begun the long job of sorting and categorising the thousands of documents contained in numerous box files. A start will also be made on transcribing about 80 years of hand-written minutes.

The building of two new Keepers' cottages at Stag Lane was delayed by about nine months after it was discovered that a freshwater drain ran under the site. Even though the cottages were to be supported on piles on both sides of the drain so that it would carry no extra load, Thames Water insisted that the drain be diverted.

The Putney Hospital site remains an eyesore. Building Better Health (the private sector partner) became involved last year and it looked as if matters would move ahead more quickly. However, they decided that, although the exterior design could remain (thereby avoiding the need for a new planning application), the internal design was unsuitable. New internal plans are still awaited. However, agreement has virtually been reached on the land to be given to the Conservators in compensation for the building of an access road on Common land.

The litigation brought by a Wimbledon resident against the Conservators has reached its end. Last May the High Court confirmed the decision of the Adjudicator to the Land Registry that the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act 1871 prevented the Conservators from granting rights of way. Furthermore, since the Conservators were "incompetent grantors", the resident was not entitled to a right of way by prescription under the Prescription Act 1832. The resident promptly appealed to the Court of Appeal and a two-day hearing was held at the beginning of February. The three judges held unanimously that the Conservators did in fact have the power to grant easements, but if they hadn't, following the precedent of an 1866 House of Lords decision, there could have been no rights of way by prescription, even after 40 years.

We had been warned that the proposed amendment to the 1871 Act by a Charity Commission Scheme to give the Conservators the power to grant rights of way would take time, but we never envisaged it would take over two years. Finally in February, the Office of the Third Sector agreed that the amendment could proceed but decided to await the decision of the Court of Appeal. Despite that decision it may be advisable, for the avoidance of any doubt in the future, to complete the amendment procedure and lay the Statutory Instrument before Parliament. Hopefully, the Conservators' ability to grant rights of way will be put beyond any question, so that access rights to the Putney Hospital site can be resolved.

After one of the wettest summers on record the ponds have remained full. Perhaps because of the poor summer the damage to Horse Chestnut trees by the Leaf Miner moth last year was less than expected.

David Devons, Chairman

Gifts and Legacies

Under Section 8 of the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act 1871, the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators is a body corporate with perpetual succession. This means that the body corporate exists separately from the individual Conservators. The Conservators as a body corporate is also a registered charity. Therefore, there is no inheritance tax on legacies bequeathed to them, and any gifts can be offset against the donor's income tax.

The annual levy barely produces enough to cover the salaries and related costs of the staff running the Commons, so that the Conservators depend on income generated by other means, eg from the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields, from allowing filming on the Commons and from selling items such as logs, postcards and Christmas cards.

If you would like to support the Commons by means of a donation or legacy, not only would the Conservators be most grateful but your gift would be used to benefit the Commons for present and future users.

Your Conservators are

Mr David Devons, Chairman
Sir Robert Andrew
Mr John Horrocks
Mrs Diana de Coverly Veale
Mr Norman Plastow MBE
Ms Pauline Brueseke
Mr Andrew Simon
Mrs Una Sutcliffe

For more information on issues highlighted in this newsletter log on to www.wpcc.org.uk

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