



Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators

Annual Open Meeting 29 July 2020 Report of the Chief Operations Manager Stephen Bound

For obvious reasons, when reflecting on the past year, our thoughts are dominated by the events of the last few months. Responding to the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on the Commons has been the focus of management activity since the country went into lockdown in late March. Information and advice on how public open spaces should implement the new coronavirus regulations and guidance was limited. Therefore, we were making decisions on an almost daily basis on how we could best adjust our operations to minimise risks. The actions that we took included:

- Closing the public car parks to help ensure social distancing and reduce travel to the Commons
- Closing the public toilets
- Asking that all dogs were kept on leads and;
- Taping off benches to discourage visitors from spending long periods on the Commons.

Inevitably, when you introduce restrictions, some people are going to be upset. Some will feel the restrictions go too far, others that they don't go far enough. However, I think we struck a sensible balance between, on the one hand, keeping the Commons open and available for people to enjoy, and on the other, ensuring that visitors, and equally importantly, our staff team, remained as safe as possible.

Visitor numbers on the Commons over the past few months have been the highest that anyone can remember. Data from Google suggests that we have been averaging between 2 and 5 times more visitors than usual - with people who were furloughed, families with children off school and home workers all coming to the Commons to get some much-needed respite from lockdown. Over the last few months, it has been fantastic to see the huge social value that the Commons have to the local community as a place for exercise, recreation and relaxation.

Of course, these additional visitors do not come without their problems. Perhaps the most significant issue has been the increase in the amount of rubbish being brought onto the Commons. We have had to bring in additional litter bins, dog waste bins and skips to cope with the extra waste being generated. Instead of our usual routine of emptying bins twice per week, our staff have had, during busy spells, to empty the bins twice per day. Our current waste disposal costs are at approximately three and a half times their normal level. What's more, whilst our costs in some areas have risen dramatically, income has fallen – as all fee-paying events and activities on the Commons over the past few months have been cancelled. In response, all staff have been asked to keep spending to the absolute essentials required for day to day operation. Certain works, such as improvements to operational buildings and staff properties have been put on hold until we have a clearer picture of our budgets for the

year. We are looking now at how we can phase the return of events, in line with government regulations and guidance, over the next few months. This will start with a much reduced, Wimbledon Bookfest to be held outdoors over one weekend in mid-September. Due to uncertainty over coronavirus we reluctantly took the decision to cancel our annual Commons Open Day for 2020. However, with 2021 being the 150th anniversary of the introduction of the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act, I'm sure that next year's Commons Open Day will be a very special one.

If Coronavirus wasn't enough for one year, we experienced an extremely wet winter, culminating in the wettest February on record. This brought with it another set of challenges. Prolonged spells of heavy rainfall, and the associated run off, caused extensive damage to paths. The maintenance team spent several weeks undertaking path repairs – particularly on the routes sloping down from the golf course to the Playing Fields. A significant path restoration project was also undertaken on Putney Heath. Drainage and resurfacing work were carried out on the section of Ladies Mile between Inner Park Ride and Tibbet's Corner, where flooding had made the paths almost impassable. If climate change predictions are correct, these more extreme weather conditions – and the impact that they have on the Commons, could be a more regular occurrence in future years.

Another casualty of the wet weather was the Rosslyn Park Schools Rugby Sevens Tournament. For those of you not familiar with the event, it is the largest schools' rugby tournament in the world and is held annually at the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields. In early March, just a couple of weeks before the tournament was due to begin, most of the pitches were underwater. As a result, we had to take the difficult decision to tell the organisers that the vast majority of the pitches at REMPf would not be available, which, in effect meant the cancellation of the tournament. On a positive note, we are currently in negotiation with Rosslyn Park to hold the event on the Commons for the next 5 years – giving them a secure venue and WPCc a secure income for the future.

Despite the challenges over the last 12 months, the vital task of conserving the important habitats on the Commons has continued. Over winter, the Maintenance Team cleared trees from a large area of heathland on Putney Heath, just north of Jubilee Path. Our regular group of volunteers, the Scrub Bashers, led by Peter Haldane - our Conservation Officer - continued the never-ending task of clearing birch saplings and gorse from areas of heathland and acid grassland. Meadow management and restoration work was undertaken across Wimbledon Common, Putney Heath and Putney Lower Common. At Scio Pond, trees and scrub were cleared from the banks to improve the habitat for fish, invertebrates and aquatic vegetation. At Farm Bog, one of London's few remaining examples of a raised mire, our Maintenance team installed dams in order to help maintain the high water levels vital for the preservation of the peat soils. The hard work that has gone into the management of the Commons clearly shows. Both Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common were awarded London in Bloom gold awards in September 2019 – and for the second year running, Wimbledon Common was awarded Common of the Year.

Finally, I'd just like to say a few words about our staff. Day to day management of open spaces is not a job that can be carried out from home – and our staff have been out on the Commons, day in day out, throughout the lockdown period, working to ensure that the Commons remain a pleasant, accessible and safe environment for everyone. On busy days, our Keepers were speaking to literally hundreds of people with regard to breaches of byelaws or social distancing. As I mentioned earlier, our Maintenance Teams have been working seven days a

week to ensure that bins are emptied and litter is cleared. The staff have dealt with every new challenge with commitment and enthusiasm. So, I'd like to finish by thanking them and wishing them, and all of you, a much less challenging year to come.