

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – December 2020

Notes of the Conservators' General Open Meeting held on Wednesday 2 December at 7.30pm via Zoom Webinar

Conservators: Diane Neil Mills, Elected (Chairman)
Shirley Gillbe, Elected
David Hince, Elected
Peter Hirsch, Elected
Sarah-Jane Holden, Elected
Mike Rappolt, Appointed MoD
Dr Ros Taylor, Appointed DEFRA
Nigel Ware, Appointed Home Office

Officers: Mr Stephen Bound, Chief Operations Manager
Mr Peter Haldane, Conservation and Engagement Officer

Guest Speaker: Carol Andrews, Wimbledon Village Stables

Approximately 64 Levy-payers and other members of the general public

1. Welcome

Chairman

Welcome and good evening. On behalf of the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators it is my great pleasure to welcome everyone to the 2020 General Open Meeting. My name is Diane Neil Mills and it is my enormous honour to serve as the Chairman of the Conservators.

We appreciate the commitment and interest in the Commons that tonight's attendance reflects and we would like to thank everyone for their support for participating by electronic communications, a necessity because of the ongoing pandemic. We remain hopeful that possibly by next June we will be able to hold our Annual Open Meeting in person. Despite all of the advantages of electronic communications it is fair to say we all long for the opportunity to exchange a smile across a room rather than across a screen.

When we originally chose the date of the meeting we thought that we have very cleverly, though completely unintentionally scheduled it for the eve of liberation and we would therefore enjoy the benefits inherent in a somewhat captive audience so with the Government's clarification issued last week we discovered that we would be in the position of competing with the re-opening of late-night hairdressers, non-essential shops and pubs serving substantial meals and to those establishments, on behalf of the Conservators, I offer my most sincere apologies for any adverse impact that you may have suffered through the clash with our meeting and hope that business promptly rebounds at the close of this evening's proceedings.

Talking of local establishments, I would like to offer a special welcome to Carol Andrews, owner of the Wimbledon Village Stables, who has kindly agreed to speak this evening. I would now like to introduce the other Conservators:

Shirley Gillbe, Elected
Peter Hirsch, Elected
David Hince, Elected
Sarah-Jane Holden, Elected
Mike Rappolt, MoD Appointed
Dr Ros Taylor, Defra Appointed
Nigel Ware, Home Office Appointed.

Also joining us this evening is Chief Operations Manager, Stephen Bound, who is standing in for Simon Lee, our Chief Executive, who is unfortunately is on sick leave and to whom we send our best wishes for a return to good health. We are also joined by Peter Haldane, our Conservation and Engagement Officer. I would also like to thank Angela Evans-Hill whose title of Executive

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Assistant and Communications Officer belies her realm of influence and whose capabilities have allowed this evening's meeting to be so seamlessly produced. We are also assisted this evening by Paula Graystone, Deputy Clerk & Ranger.

In regard to questions, a number have been received in advance and questions can be submitted during the meeting. These will all be answered at the end of the meeting. Any questions not answered this evening will be answered following the meeting.

Thank you very much.

2. Chairman's Update

Chairman

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For those of you who had any lingering doubts about the importance of Wimbledon and Putney Commons following the country's first lockdown last Spring, I would think that the recent experience during the second period of high alert, has proven irrefutable.

For despite the increasingly frosty temperatures and diminishing daylight hours, visitor numbers as we have all seen have continued to grow unabated. And whilst the familiarity of the Commons has provided much needed respite and reassurance for many, for others it has been a new discovery and with it a change in lifestyle and perhaps perspective on life that seems impossible to reverse.

The Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act of 1871 established this great resource for the purposes of recreation and exercise. And yet both the first and second lockdowns as well as the interregnum that separated the two has demonstrated that the role of the Commons extends well beyond the physical dimension of these stated purposes. In this alien environment in which we have all been living, devoid of normal social contact, the value of these sacred 1140 acres to our mental and social welfare is tangible and we are united by the shared sense of gratitude that we all feel as a result.

The 1871 Act provides the organisation with great independence, which has allowed it to retain its unique character over the decades. It is because of this autonomy that the Commons are still patrolled by mounted keepers and passionately cared for by those for whom it is a home as well as a place of work.

And as you are aware, governance is provided by both elected and appointed Conservators and principally financed by those fortunate enough to live in the domain. This unique model allows for both local and the wider public interests to be represented and decision making to be fully devolved. It is a model that has stood the test of time and should be celebrated.

The model also provides an opportunity for the stewardship to be renewed or refreshed every three years and as such this evening marks the last open meeting of this board's tenure, given the forthcoming elections that will take place next March as well as some changes amongst the appointed Conservators. My fellow Conservator Nigel Ware will be speaking about this later this evening.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the initiatives that have been delivered during this board's term as well as some of the ongoing areas of focus in three broad areas: governance, investment and engagement.

1. Governance

In terms of governance, as I said at our Annual Open Meeting in July, bringing the Statutory Inquiry to a close has been this board's highest priority and we therefore welcomed the publication of the final report in July.

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In support of the inquiry's underlying objectives, we openly recognised the opportunity to provide further resilience and have therefore put in place a number of measures to bolster our operational efficiency including the Access Framework, the Code of Conduct, the Enquiries and Complaints Procedure and most recently the Election Guidelines.

The work of the Audit and Risk Committee has provided further scrutiny of our governance and although the committee's contribution may not be immediately obvious to the occasional visitor to the Commons, the insights provided have been invaluable in strengthening the organisation. I would like to thank Mrs Sarah Wilton who has served as an external member of this committee for the dedication and diligence she has brought to this role.

The Commission's report also identified the scope to further clarify certain provisions of the 1871 Act. We initiated a review of the constitution in 2018 through the establishment of a working group and since then have made significant progress to identify the areas requiring amendment and the various procedures through which any changes could be affected, including a scheme through the Commission.

We are fortunate to have the support in principle of the Charity Commission with this initiative. I do however understand that the Commission is currently liaising with their sponsoring department to ensure that the scope of their powers to effect constitutional reform is clear.

Last December, we announced that we would begin a phased consultation process this year, which unfortunately has been suspended due to the pandemic. It is however very much our view that only through meaningful consultation that allows proper debate and scrutiny will the level of public support for change to the constitution be tested.

We are also very fortunate to have two local barristers, Mrs Francesca Quint and Mr George Laurence QC, to assist us with this important undertaking. Both are experts in their respective fields of charity law and open spaces and we are most grateful for their support.

Given my earlier comments about our constitution serving us well, I would like to reassure everyone that constitutional reform is not about introducing a more permissive regime or diluting the fundamental purposes of the charity. There is a clear mandate through our founding legislation, charitable objectives and the special designations of our sites for our duty to protect and preserve the Commons and make them available for the purposes of exercise and recreation. We are not looking to alter these.

2. Investment

In terms of short-term capital projects, to complement the river restoration works along the Beverley Brook that were carried out in 2019, I am delighted that we were able this year to upgrade the path that runs alongside the length of the brook. Both projects were only made possible due to the financial support of various partners and we are indebted to the organisations and individuals responsible for providing that assistance. I also want to thank the staff for both securing the sponsorship and ensuring the works were completed to such a high standard.

Longer term, there remains a need to invest in both the natural and built environments and the Masterplan for the Commons will provide the framework for that investment. The project, initiated by our chief executive and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, will identify opportunities for targeted intervention in areas such as education, volunteering, visitor facilities and landscape management. We are planning on carrying out a consultation on this project next spring and I would encourage everyone to engage in the process.

Implementation of the masterplan will require sustained financial capacity and the work has highlighted the fact that the current levy is insufficient to meet the longer-term investment and

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maintenance requirements of the Commons. As such, amending the levy has been identified as one of the key areas in which constitutional reform is being considered. Despite any increase in the levy, as an organisation there will almost certainly always be a need for fundraising, particularly to support capital investment. The Commons enjoy strong public goodwill and we will need to build on this to deliver the masterplan. And I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our financial sponsors, many of whom have contributed anonymously, for their support.

3. Engagement

The launch of the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons in September 2019 brought together all those who share a passion for the Commons and I would very much like to thank all of those who have supported the Friends, particularly those who so generously recently renewed their memberships despite the fact that our programme of events for the current year could not take place due to the pandemic.

The Friends provide a structure for fundraising and collective celebration, including that of the 150th anniversary of the date on which the 1871 Act received Royal Assent, 16 August 2021. My fellow Conservator, Sarah Jane Holden, will be speaking later this evening on this matter.

Engagement with the community takes many forms not least of which is through volunteering. I would like to pay special tribute to our individual volunteers, who through their quiet, and in many cases anonymous contribution, be it picking litter, recording wildlife, or researching our history, support the organisation.

I would also like to recognise the contribution made by the volunteers who support the Commons more collectively through the Stakeholder Group and Wildlife and Conservation Forum. As Conservators, understanding the considered views of these bodies is an important part of our decision-making. Although there is no single template that determines the way in which these individuals are involved, they all share a love of nature and a sense of community and we are sincerely thankful for their important contribution.

As I mentioned earlier, the term of this board is drawing to a close. Although the results of the triennial elections are by definition unpredictable, we do know with certainty that DEFRA appointed Conservator Dr Ros Taylor will most sadly be retiring from the board at the end of this month.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank Dr Taylor, who has served on the board since 2013. A retired lecturer in ecology and conservation, Ros has made an enormous contribution to the wildlife and conservation activities on the Commons, raising the awareness of the importance of monitoring management activities and engaging with the wider Commons' community through initiatives such as the annual BioBlitz weekend of nature. She is delightfully insightful and the wisdom she brings to the board, always with a positive outlook and cheery disposition, will be deeply missed.

We also announced earlier this year that Mike Rappolt, MOD appointed Conservator, will also be retiring from the board. Timescales for Mike's retirement are somewhat uncertain so I will save the full tributes for a later date but I do want to express my gratitude to Mike for his dedication and service, particularly in leading the Audit and Risk Committee.

I would like to thank all my fellow Conservators for their dedication and commitment. The individual perspectives and diverse range of skills, interests and experience allow for lively discussion, considered deliberation and I believe effective decision-making. I think I can safely speak on behalf of all the Conservators to say that it is an honour to serve in this role.

And although those responsible for the stewardship may well change, rest assured that the management of this unique resource is safe and secure with the 22 members of our staff, whose loyalty, capability and dedication is beyond any doubt.

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Despite the challenges inherent in the events of the past nine months, there has never been any question in the staff's commitment or ability to ensure this unique resource functions properly and remains accessible to all. Our staff are driven by nothing more than a sense of duty and humble pride in providing a public service that is treasured by so many and we are grateful to them for everything they do.

Thank you.

3. Operations Update

Stephen Bound

It goes without saying that coronavirus has continued to have considerable impact on the Commons over the summer, autumn and now into winter. Nevertheless, with the possible exception of the last four weeks when we were back in lockdown, we have seen some return to normality. The car parks and the toilets have remained open. With a relaxation of the restrictions imposed or recommended by government we have been able to avoid some of the controls we had to introduce earlier in the year – such as closing off benches and seating – or asking people to keep their dogs on leads at all times. Our horses have been brought back to our stables and the Keepers have been able to resume their mounted patrols. Golf restarted and football returned to the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields in August. The schools and outdoor learning groups who use the commons have been back on site regularly since the beginning of summer. And whilst most events were cancelled, we were able to host Wimbledon Bookfest again this year. Whilst the event was very much scaled down, I know the organisers considered it a great success.

What has remained abnormal is the number of visitors that we have been receiving. Our suspicion is that large numbers of people 'discovered the Commons during the first lockdown – between march and June – and a significant proportion have continued to visit even when workplaces, shops, pubs and restaurants reopened in early summer.

There have been two significant impacts as a result of these well above average visitor numbers. Firstly, our litter and waste management costs have remained extremely high. Where we would normally expect that our annual waste management costs would be in the region of £20,000, we anticipate that this year's costs will be around £50,000 – and that's before we factor in the thousands of hours of staff and volunteer time which have been dedicated to dealing with litter and waste.

The other impact of the high visitor numbers is on the vegetation of the Commons. In the very high footfall areas, the grass has been all but worn away through trampling. This is particularly noticeable in areas such as the grass surrounding the Windmill Car Park. On areas such as Rushmere, additional informal paths have been created by repeated, heavy use – and a number of paths on the Commons have been unofficially widened as a result of the numbers of walkers and cyclists. The car parks too have been incredibly busy. We've had to undertake work recently in both the Windmill Car Park and Springwell car park in order to prevent inappropriate parking which was resulting in congestion and damage to grass verges.

Despite this having been a very busy period, we have been able to complete some important new projects. Perhaps most notable of these is the Beverley Brook path on Wimbledon Common. Those of you who are regular visitors to the Brook will know that the path along the eastern bank would become all but unusable in the winter months due to waterlogging. It is actually part of an advertised cycle network. However, none but the most adventurous of mountain bikers would have been likely to tackle it during spells of wet weather. So, having completed the project to restore the habitat of the brook in 2018, we then began to plan improvements to the path which runs alongside it. In September 2019 we submitted an application for funding from South Western Railways 'Customers and Communities Fund' and early this year we heard that our application had been successful. We started and completed the surfacing work in September - at a cost of £80,000. £60,000 of this came from South Western Railways – and the remaining £20,000 came via the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons. Feedback from people using the route has been extremely positive. The next stage of the project will be to install benches along the path –

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so that visitors can sit and relax and enjoy the Brook and its wildlife as the habitat improves and develops over time.

On Wildcroft Road up on Putney Heath, we have been able to complete a major piece of work cutting back the overhanging trees along the entire length of the road in order to make the area lighter and more inviting – and to discourage fly tipping. This is something we had wanted to carry out for a few years – but had found impossible due to the number of vehicles parked on Wildcroft Road throughout the day. However, when we heard that Wandsworth Council were closing the road to undertake resurfacing work, we were able to contact them and ask them to extend the road closure by a few days so that we could safely carry out the tree work. I have to say the staff at Wandsworth Council were extremely helpful and we're grateful to them for making this possible.

In just the last couple of weeks, we've completed a substantial tree planting project. 800 native trees, including hazel, blackthorn and hawthorn have been planted within the woodland in order to try and create a more diverse woodland understorey. It's particularly nice that we are able to do this – as we more often than not are chopping down trees in order to maintain the valuable heathland habitat found on the Commons. As I'm sure you're all aware, not only will tree planting help to diversify the woodland habitat, it is also widely acknowledged to be an important tool in the battle against climate change.

The final piece of really positive news is that we have just secured a new five year agreement with Thomas Schools to use facilities at the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields. Thomas first began using REMP in 2015 – and their initial five-year deal has just expired. The renewed agreement provides much needed income for WPC and makes use of the facilities during weekdays, when the playing fields would otherwise be very quiet.

So, as the year has gone on, we have seen some return to normality on the Commons – and we very much hope for all our sakes, that this is something we continue to experience as we move into 2021.

4. Financial Update

Nigel Ware

Good evening.

I am going to give you a brief update on the development of WPC's finances in this difficult and uncertain financial year.

Our unrestricted income for the 7-month period to the end of October was some £86,000 lower than at the same time last year. Our income from sports and recreation was down £50,000 while our income from fairs and filming was down by £34,000.

On the expenditure side we have made every effort to hold down our operational costs but the impact of Covid has been that in the 7 months we have spent £22,000 more than last year on skips and over £3,000 more on overtime for our maintenance staff. The end result of these negative impacts is that at the end of October we had incurred an operating loss of £53,000. This loss is before taking account of the non-cash adjustments we have to make at the end of the financial year in respect of the Local Government Pension Scheme.

Our restricted income and expenditure during the period has broadly been in equilibrium.

However, it is not all bad news because our investment portfolio achieved a gain of £175,000 in the seven-month period.

Also, our cash balances have remained healthy with the figure at the end of October being £335,000.

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The outcome for the remaining five months of the year is difficult to predict but we are clearly going to suffer a further loss of sports income, particularly as it seems likely that the Rosslyn Park National Schools 7 tournament in March will not be held. Therefore, it seems probable that a further loss will arise in the five-month period.

Thank you

5. Friends Update/150th Anniversary

Sarah-Jane Holden

The Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons have been working towards a calendar of events for 2021 that will suitably recognise and celebrate the importance of reaching our 150th anniversary. All events currently scheduled are listed on the WPCCC website.

The first event in the Diary for 2021 is in March at the All England Club. It will include the premier performance of a history play, titled 'Uncommon' to be the Wimbledon Civic Theatre Trust. It is based around the events leading to the passing of the Act creating the WPCCC and includes a cast of characters as varied as Earl Spencer, owner of the Common at the time, and the local MP Sir Henry Peek, who was not at all happy with the Earls plans to 'enclose the Common'.

The plan is for the play to develop and expand on the history of the Commons as the year progresses culminating in outdoor performances on the Commons at the end of next year. We have secured sponsorship for most of the costs of the production and we are now looking for the final £1,500. If you would like to help us reach this target and be involved in something truly unique, please contact Angela at the Ranger's Office for more information.

The Commons are home to the world's oldest cross country running club, the 3rd oldest golf club in England, though some will debate that; the rules of Hockey were written on the Common, Football has been played here for over 250 years and 18 years ago saw the start of the journey of our AFC Wimbledon from the Richardson Evans playing fields to last month playing in their new Stadium in Plough Lane. Queen Victoria watched the National Rifle Association shooting here. There are 5 tennis courts, 2 Cricket Clubs, 1 Bowling club, we have 18 miles of horse rides, 10 miles of cycle paths and countless hours of walking and running paths. Caesar camped here and games were an everyday Roman activity. Games have been played on the Common for ever.

On Sunday August 15, our Games Day will celebrate all these games and more. Planning is underway with each discipline managing their particular format for celebration. Here is another plea. We know the Ranger's Office is more than capable of managing such an event however it is too much to ask of them with so much else going on next year to do this. Consequently, we are looking for a major-domo to take charge of the whole day. It is a voluntary role. If you are interested in taking up this challenge, please contact Angela at the Ranger's Office. Seriously, we need you.

In conclusion, at the suggestion of two of our Founder Friends and with the support of the Ranger's Office we are inviting you, your school, club or group, to participate in the inaugural Wimbledon and Putney Commons Christmas Tree Trail and be part of creating a fun, enjoyable and festive trail of decorated trees for all to enjoy in the gloaming this December. The first tree on the trail is a Tree of Wishes in support of Stem4, a charity based in Wimbledon supporting teenage mental health. If you would like to take a tree in support of an organisation there are a few rules and regulations and you must register your interest with Angela at the Ranger's Office.

We would like to sincerely thank all those who have volunteered and promoted the Friends this year. And to everyone, have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and see you out and about on the Commons.

6. Conservators' Election

Nigel Ware

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We are making good progress with the arrangements for the 2021 triennial election for the five elected Conservators.

After the last election in 2018 we were encouraged by the Charity Commission to produce some clear guidance for the conduct of future elections. This process was concluded following the publication of the Commission's Inquiry report in July 2020, and the Election Guidelines and Procedures were published on our website in early November. They contain separate guidance for the Returning Officer, Candidates, Incumbent Conservators, Officers of WPCC and in relation to the holding of hustings.

A Candidate Brief and Application Pack can also be found on the Election Pages of our website. This document explains the role of being a Conservator and contains the Application Pack that prospective candidates need to complete. If you are interested in being involved in the running of the Commons please do consider standing as a Candidate.

The impact of Covid means that some, if not all, of the meetings normally held during the pre-election period will not be held physically for this election. Either because they are specifically prohibited under the Government's Coronavirus restrictions or because to hold them physically would not be appropriate during a pandemic.

Consequently, the meetings between the Returning Officer and prospective candidates will be held by video-conference on 5th and 7th January at 7.00 p.m. Details about this will be found on our website.

Both the Putney Society and the Wimbledon Society have kindly agreed to hold hustings events on 18th and 25th February respectively. Again, it seems likely that these will have to be held by video-conference.

The website contains a summary of the key dates in the election but I will run through them now.

The list of electors will be available for public inspection from 30 December until 20 January. Anyone wishing to inspect the list will need to do so by appointment and I am considering how best to do this so as to minimise any Covid risk to our staff and the person wishing to inspect the list.

If anybody has an objection to the list they will need to raise that objection by 20 January because after that date the list will be submitted to the Scrutineer who will be using it to send the Ballot Papers to voters.

Candidates will need to submit their completed application packs and biographical details no later than 27 January if they want their name to appear on the ballot papers. I expect you will agree with me that having one's name on the ballot paper would seem to be highly desirable.

The Scrutineer for this election is Civica Election Services who were formerly called Electoral Reform Services. Civica will be sending out the ballot papers and other election material, including statements from the candidates, during the week commencing 8 February.

You can cast your vote either online or by returning the voting paper in the reply-paid envelope provided. I would encourage you to cast your vote online as that saves us the cost of the postage.

Also, I would like you all to make sure that you cast your vote and to encourage all your friends and neighbours to do so. The election turnout last time was 21% which was an improvement of 4.6% on 2015 but is still very low. It would be good if we could get the turnout up to 25% this year. So, as I have said, please encourage people to vote.

You need to get your vote back to the Scrutineer, whether electronically or by post, by 5.00 p.m. on Wednesday 10 March. All being well, I anticipate being able to announce the results the

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following day. I really hope that there will not be any Trumpian type challenges to the election result!

Finally, if you are interested in standing for election as a Conservator do go along to our website and download a Candidate Brief and Application Pack.

Thank you.

7. Horse-riding on the Commons

Carol Andrews, Wimbledon Village Stables

Carol Andrews gave a presentation on the history and current operation of Wimbledon Village Stables, highlighting the fundraising that they carry out for many local charities, including Wimbledon and Putney Commons.

8. Volunteering on the Commons

Peter Haldane

Needless to say, it's been a difficult year so far as volunteering on the Commons is concerned.

We started off the year very well with full attendance at all of our regular organised events but unfortunately, from the middle of March 2020, the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 meant this all suddenly changed and many events were placed on hold until further notice.

During the beginning of November, organised events once again resumed but...further restrictions, unfortunately, resulted in the further cancellations of events. This said...since the initial period of lockdown was put in place during March 2020, there have still been volunteers on the Commons.

Perhaps the largest single pressure faced by the Commons over the past few months has been the huge amount of litter that has regularly been left behind by visitors to the Commons.

While this particular activity has taken a vast amount of staff time to manage over the past few months, there have been at least 30 regular volunteer litter pickers involved in helping to support our efforts to keep the Commons free of litter.

Some of these volunteers litter pick every day while others make more occasional visits but every bag of litter removed from the Commons helps.

In addition to these individual volunteers, a big thank you should also be made to Veronica Drye and her group of local volunteers who have also played a significant part in rallying support and helping to keep the area surrounding the Rushmere and Westside Common clear of litter. I'm not sure how many volunteers Veronica now has involved with her group but they and other local people have definitely been a big help to our overall efforts of keeping the Commons clear of litter.

Also, we shouldn't forget the many young people who have helped litter pick on the Commons as part of their DofE award programmes. At the current time, we have 13 people involved in the DofE programme helping us on the Commons but since 2016, we've had 88 youngsters involved with the DofE help on the Commons.

Another group of volunteers who have also remained active during the lockdown have been the Commons various wildlife enthusiasts.

Helping to record many aspects of the Commons' flora and fauna, individuals with specific interests in the Commons wildlife have continued to record exactly what's been out and about during the summer months and all of this information will make its way into the Commons Annual Report which is currently being prepared by Ros Taylor.

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If you are at all interested in wildlife, please get in touch with the Rangers Office or myself or indeed have a look on our website as we would love to hear news about any of the wildlife that you've seen on the Commons.

What's coming up?

Well, despite the ongoing need to remain safe during these difficult times, organised volunteering activities on the Commons are set to resume again very soon and we are planning to welcome back volunteers for our weekend scrub bashing group and our mid-week volunteer group over the next few weeks.

Hopefully, in the not too distant future, during 2021, we'll be starting another new volunteering group on the Commons. Unfortunately, we do not yet have a suitably interesting name agreed for this group but basically they will be involved in litter picking along the Beverley Brook and hopefully carrying out some other related tasks such as Himalayan balsam pulling.

We were hoping to start this group during summer 2020 but events made this impossible so the plan is to initiate the group during spring 2021.

The good news is that we already have 30 people who have shown an interest in this activity but ideally, a small-sized groups will provide regular visits to the brook in order to remove as much litter as possible thus ensuring that it does not reach the wider reaches of the Thames and beyond.

Another initiative that we are also hoping to begin will be to ask volunteers to help look after specific small areas of the Commons such as Stag Bog for example. This would involve a small group following a specific management plan and making irregular visits to help protect various locations.

So, in parting, thank you to everybody who has continued to support the Commons in a volunteering capacity during 2020 and we'll keep everyone up to date with any new volunteering activities that become available in the future.

9. Questions & Answers

Moderated by David Hince

We have received quite a few questions, several touching on similar topics so where possible I will group these together.

1. Colin Rowe

During lockdown, a lot more people are taking advantage of the common, particularly for cyclists and joggers. While it's obviously wonderful to see so many more people enjoying the common, are there concerns over the impact this will have on the common both in terms of the infrastructure and plant life?

Response from Steve Bound

I would agree that it is fantastic to see so many people using the Commons and it has been rewarding to see how important they have been during what has been a difficult period for everybody.

In terms of impact, there is no doubt that we are seeing impact from footfall destroying the grass, new paths being created or paths being widened, the impact on the car parks with additional cars and vehicles parked in inappropriate places. In terms of ecological impact, we are not yet at a point where we can measure that. We are not seeing significant impact on the remoter more ecologically important areas of the site but, having said that if we are getting more visitors and getting more dogs on the Commons then that will have an effect long-term. As the Commons are a Site of Special Scientific Interest overseen by Natural England, and I have spoken to them this

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week on this issue and we will be arranging a meeting with them and Richmond Park who are experiencing similar problems to see how manage these problems.

2. Gerard Strahan

Given the way that you have been successful in recruiting over a 100 volunteers to help with day to day maintenance work and other tasks what is the best way to increase that number of volunteers who can lift some of the burden that you face in maintaining the Commons to the high standards that you rightly strive for?

Response from Peter Haldane

That's a very good question. From my own point of view, volunteering on the Commons is not specifically about numbers or how many people we are able to attract, rather it's about helping to fill some of the gaps or relieve the burden where it is necessary and helpful to do so. For example, without volunteer scrub bashers helping on the Commons heathland, we would simply not have the resources to keep up with the ever-encroaching woodland scrub. The way that we manage the scrub with two visits per month strikes just the right balance with invasive trees getting cut back while leaving just enough scrub to provide suitable habitats for wildlife.

Another example, where more regular volunteers may be needed is the proposed litter picking along the Beverley Brook, we need a large number of volunteers for this. In both cases though the number of volunteers required needs to be appropriate to the scale of the task in hand. So while we will almost certainly require the help of additional volunteers on the Commons in the future this should be as and when the appropriate opportunities arise. It should also be remembered that many of the outside volunteering activities are very much a joint effort between the volunteers and the Commons' staff so it is a way to balance that between the two groups to make sure they work well together. We have been very fortunate with all our volunteers and we always talk to anyone who comes forward to hopefully find a suitable outlet for their skills.

3a. Jonathan Callaway

Are there any plans to register the Friends of Wimbledon Common as a separate charity? If not why not? Its income of voluntary donations and its outgoings, however disbursed, need to be separately accounted for and the results available to all levy payers. Could these be posted on the WPCC website?

3b. Antoinette Urwick

How many friends of Wimbledon and Putney Common are there?

Response from Sarah-Jane Holden

In answering Mr Callaway's question, the short answer is no. The Friends are incorporated within the WPCC and the Friends are led and managed by the Conservators. Initially the Friends were to be a separate entity with its own constitution and we got to the brink of signing it off but then logic dictated that to run a separate charity supporting a charity with all the financial compliance requirements and to meet requirements of GDPR was just not logical. Accounting matters in relation to income raised by the Friends, this is treated separately within the management accounts and these are published on the website.

I note that you are not able to open the Friends page on the website, this is only accessible to those who have signed up as a Friend. However, having raised that question I do notice that the constitution and remit of the Friends is within that section and I will make sure that is moved to the general Friends page that is accessible by everybody who visits the website.

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In response to the question regarding the number of Friends, at the end of October this year, we have across the three categories over 400 members, which indicates over 1,000 individuals supporting us. To the end of March 2020, we raised £22,000 and at the end of October, the fundraising has reached £26,480. It reinforces that the Friends are a welcome addition to the structure of the charity.

4a. Colin Rowe

There has been a very obvious increase in vehicle traffic recently, particularly at The Windmill car park. What measures are being considered to deal with this?

4b. Andrew Dalton

Are there any plans to increase parking capacity to ensure that the public can enjoy the common without being constrained by access difficulties.

4c. Antoinette Urwick

Has any research/survey been carried out as to where cars come from and is there a possibility to charge those coming from outside the borough.

Response by Steve Bound

Starting with surveys, yes we have carried out a number of surveys over the last few years on car parking as well as a survey carried out by ParkRun on our behalf. What we have found is that the majority of people do come from SW postcodes, relatively locally. But there are a significant proportion who come from further afield outside the area, perhaps from Surrey, SE or North London, so we do know that visitors do travel some distance to get here. We have seen an increase in numbers particularly at the Windmill and Springwell car parks and we have discussed adding more spaces but we do not feel that it would be appropriate to take more green space for parking and the suspicion is that however many spaces are added, they would be filled. Parking charges are a tricky issue and many people have asked over the summer why don't we charge as it would bring in some income and deter some people from coming in their car. We derive our powers from the 1871 Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act and in 1871 no-one could have foreseen an issue with car parking on the Commons and so there is no specific power within the Act to charge for parking. We could take the view that as the landowner there would be an implied power to make that charge but we are also acutely aware that charging is not something that would be universally popular and so it's not something we will rush to do. In the short term the one thing we could do, and the one thing shown in our surveys, is that there are commuters using the Commons and the car parks are very much intended for users of the Commons. Surveys have found around 20 commuters using the car park which may not sound much but it is 10% of the parking spaces so if we were to do anything it would be on how to deter commuters from accessing the car parks.

6. Mike Kaufman

Could the possibility of reintroducing Beavers to the Beverley Brook be looked at? He noticed the Brook and surrounding areas have been improved, efforts have been made to mimic the activity of beavers to help the brook return to a more natural state.

Response by Dr Ros Taylor

Beavers on the Brook – what a wonderful idea! You will have heard about it in the news this week that beavers have been successfully reintroduced in the south west of England and also in West Sussex. Beavers have been missing for some 400 or so years and although the Brook's name derives presumably from a thriving community of beavers, bringing them back is not

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straightforward and would require a lot of local research. The overall aim, and this is being looked at nationwide, is that beavers have a role to play in flood prevention: by creating their dams they slow down the movement of water through river systems and therefore help to alleviate the peaks of flooding. They also store water in terms of alleviation of drought and they create habitats for biodiversity. But if you look at the practicalities on Beverley Brook here on the Commons it is a tricky story. The Brook has been canalised for many years and what we are doing is putting back dams within the boundaries of the established river area. If you were to open that up completely then you would have to understand that beavers would build dams wherever they felt like and there would be the possibility of local flooding – which does of course create local habitats and help prevent flash flooding but if you look upstream, then they might create dams in more suburban areas which could create a big problem. There would have to be careful evaluation and research before you could begin. There may be an issue with flooded paths, horserides etc, although the biodiversity would improve – difficult things to balance up. There may be more immediate thing for us to look at in terms of re-wilding and perhaps the biggest thing we would like to see back on the Commons would be some large grazing animals, who would help keep the heathland areas open and create mini-pools that we need for diversity within those communities.

7. Colin Rowe

In some areas of the common, there is still a lack of bins and dog bins. Are there any plans to increase the number of bins?

Response by Steve Bound

I suspect it may surprise many people that across the Commons there are more than 80 bins and we bring in additional bins in the summer to cope with the increase in litter. So the short answer is no, we wouldn't bring in any additional bins. Servicing the bins we already have takes up a huge amount of staff time and we could not cope with adding to that. The other thing to bear in mind is that additional bins do not necessarily mean less litter. Interestingly the area at the base of the hills north of the Windmill car park is a popular picnic spot and we had one bin there and it was constantly overflowing with bags left around it that were being ripped open by foxes and crows. We looked at adding bins in the area but decided to take the bin away and the result of that is that there is no litter in the area – people take their litter away with them. Adding bins doesn't always solve the problem.

8. Jonathan Callaway

Four of the five elected Conservators are residents of Wimbledon while, as the Putney Society has observed, 60% of the levy payers live in the Putney and Roehampton area. This imbalance came as a result of a concerted and well-financed election campaign by the "Common Sense" Group. Will any steps be taken to create a level playing field for all potential candidates this time around, given there is no limit on campaign financing and no prohibition on candidates campaigning jointly or sharing a manifesto?

Response from Nigel Ware

The fact is that 3 of the 5 elected Conservators live in Wimbledon, 1 lives near Putney Heath and 1 lives near Putney Lower Common.

The electors are determined in the first instance by whether they live within $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile of Wimbledon Common or Putney Heath and if they don't qualify as electors under that rule you look to see whether they live within the old Parish of Putney. I suspect that a majority of residents qualify as electors because they live within $\frac{3}{4}$ of mile of Wimbledon Common or Putney Heath.

Following the last election, some electors made complaints to the Charity Commission about the election and that resulted in the Commission including the conduct of the election in their Statutory Inquiry. The Inquiry report published in July 2020 stated that the Commission had given advice

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and guidance to the Conservators on the importance of having clear written policies and procedures relating to elections. The Conservators have now done exactly this and published the Guidelines and Procedures for the 2021 Election in October of this year. They can be downloaded from our website.

As the Returning Officer, I believe that the introduction of these guidelines and procedures will result in there being a level playing field, as the questioner asks, because there is now clarity and transparency of what the procedures and rules will be for Candidates and incumbent Conservators and for me as the Returning Officer.

9. Jonathan Callaway

Please explain what changes to the 1871 Act are to be sought.

Response from Diane Neil Mills

Thank you for your question. As I mentioned in my remarks, at our first Board meeting it was agreed to establish the Constitution Working Group and agree Terms of Reference for that. Following 18 months of exploratory work by that group, we were in a position in December 2019 to issue a resolution that identified the broad areas that would benefit from constitutional reform and also identified the procedures through which those changes could be effected. It also stated that we would undertake consultations, a critical part of this undertaking and this would be done on a phased basis, starting with principles and concepts before moving to actual proposed changes. I know you have asked what changes we are considering but the stage we are at is that we have identified the broad areas and specific changes would very much depend on the feedback from the consultation on what the specific changes would be. It might help to explain the three areas we have identified for constitutional change. First is the Levy, any potential amendment to the Levy would be based on recognising two important principles, one of which is the founding principle of the 1871 Act that the Levy provides the principal source of funding for the Commons and this is something that is at the heart of the model. The second is the recognition that the long-term maintenance and investment requirements of the Commons are not currently met by the level of the Levy. In terms of what we would do to the Levy, we would take an evidence-based approach and therefore the work that has been conducted on the Master Plan, as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund grant, would provide the evidence to help us understand what the requirements would be to properly invest in and maintain the Common, excepting that any large capital projects would require external financing. The second area is Buildings and Land, and the Constitutional Working Group recognised that there would be enormous benefit in regularising and clarifying some of the constitutional provisions relating to the buildings and land. As an example, Section 39 of the Act is unusual in that it provides an express power to build 6 lodges for the purpose of residences of the Keepers or officers, in addition to those already existing in 1871. The question was had those 6 lodges been built and part of the constitutional reform programme would look at that and arrive at a conclusion as to whether they had or not and whether that power had been exhausted and no longer needed to be provided for in the Act. In terms of clarity, it was felt that the Act would benefit from providing clarification on what WPC's powers were in terms of enter into and granting an easement. The third and final area was governance. This was touched on by the Charity Commission in the Statutory Inquiry and they made a reference to the need to modernise some of the governance provisions, such as the financial amounts had not been updated and there was no indexing provided in the 1871 Act and for example Section 80 sets out the provision for us to borrow, setting a limit of £5,000. Another matter that has arisen in the context of the elections is Section 20 which stipulates that the deadline for candidates to submit their nomination is 14 days before date of election. This was put in place before postal balloting had been implemented and, as the Returning Officer mentioned earlier, if you'd like your name included on the postal ballot the deadline is 6 weeks in advance of the election date. Provisions such as these do provide some operational challenges and the view is that they would benefit from being clarified. I hope that answers your question and would reiterate that the constitutional reform is not about trying to put a more permissive regime in place or fundamentally alter our

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duties, it is just to provide clarity to help with more efficient decision making and confidence in the extent of our powers and duties.

10a. Richard Metcalf

The grass on Putney Common next to the Spencer Arms pub (where tables are placed in spring/summer/autumn) and all the way across to All Saints Church is very badly worn, much worse than in previous years. What action do you propose to take to restore/repair the grass?

10b. Village High Street West Association

Increased Footfall on Rushmere – particularly going onto Rushmere at the corner of Southside Common and the Green. This has seen a very significant deterioration in the ground cover and the grass has been completely destroyed. Similarly, the footpath on the East side of the Green between nos 4 and 5 is now impassable. What action can be taken to remedy this.

Response by Steve Bound

Starting with the area between The Spencer and All Saints Church. The area where the benches go are covered by a condition in the licence that they must restore that area following use, either by re-seeding or re-turfing. It was done last year and they have been in contact to advise that they will be carrying out the work in January. The wider area towards All Saints Church is something that needs to be looked at. It does not fall within the SSSI so if it does need re-seeding we would be able to do that and will look at in the Spring.

With regard to Rushmere, it has been incredibly busy with unprecedented number of people and with people walking on from the Village it has eroded that corner of the Common. This does fall within the SSSI and we are setting up a meeting with Natural England to discuss how we can prevent and/or manage these issues in the future. The path alongside The Green, only a short section of that falls within our land however I have noticed is that the adjacent landowner has significantly cut back their hedge which has opened the path up again so is now useable.

12. Will McDonald

How much do we know about Commons users - demographics, and views on biodiversity for example?

Response from Stephen Bound

As part of the Heritage Fund project, and prior to this, we have been undertaking surveys of visitors to find out what it is they like or don't like about the Commons. As part of the Heritage Fund project, consultants were talking to people who had not visited the Commons to find out what their reasons were for not visiting and what might encourage them to make more use of the Common, or what might make the Common relevant for them. In terms of attitude to biodiversity, that is an interesting point and not something we have data on. We gather data on why people visit and many say that access to nature and wildlife is one of the reasons they visit the Commons but we don't have anything more in depth.

The Chairman thanked all the Conservators, special guest Carol Andrews, the staff but most importantly, all the participants who joined the meeting this evening and I wish you all a very happy Christmas and hope to see you in person at our annual meeting next June.

Unanswered Questions

Howard Richards

You have restricted the number of cars which can use the Sunset Road car park. Why? Further golfers park there and stay several hours blocking up what are essentially short-term spaces. Can you discourage use of these very valuable spaces by golfers?

Response – With the increase in the number of visitors to the Commons, the Windmill and Springwell car parks have become increasingly busy. Springwell in particular has become difficult for our staff to negotiate with their machinery with vehicles parking inconsiderately and in areas specifically marked as no parking. In many areas, the grass areas have been eroded and become parking spaces and it is these areas that we are reclaiming in order to ensure safe movement of cars and working vehicles around the car park. With regard to golfers, we hope this issue will stop when the building work at the Study School finishes and the area around the golf club frees up to allow more parking for the golfers.

Soni S

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of cyclists using non cycling paths. What is being done to discourage this?

Response – Since the start of the pandemic, the number of cyclists has increased significantly, particularly early on when Richmond Park closed their gates to cyclists. We do understand that many of our newer cycling visitors are not aware of the restrictions as to where they can cycle and our Keepers have spent a lot of time this year stopping and talking to those on the golf course or mountain biking in the woods etc.