

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

Minutes of the Conservators' ANNUAL OPEN MEETING held at the Holy Trinity Church, Ponsonby Road, Roehampton SW15 4LA

Conservators:	Diane Neil Mills, Elected (Chairman) Sue Bucknall, Elected Peter Hirsch, Elected Michael Johnston, Elected Mike Rappolt, Appointed Ministry of Defence Nigel Ware, Appointed Home Office
Officers:	Stephen Bound, Chief Operations Manager
Auditor:	Simon Webber, Kreston Reeves LLP
Apologies:	David Hince, Elected Oliver Bennet OBE, Appointed Defra
	35 Levy-payers and other members of the general public viewed the meeting.

1. Welcome

Chairman

Good evening

On behalf of the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators, it is my great pleasure to welcome everyone to the 2022 Annual Open Meeting this evening. Needless to say, not having held an annual meeting in person since June 2019 makes this evening quite special and I would like to thank everyone for attending. I am grateful to the Reverend Joshua Rey, Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, for allowing WPCC to hold the meeting in this magnificent Grade II listed church.

I would also like to welcome special welcome to Auditor, Mr Simon Webber, of Kreston Reeves. Under WPCC's constitution, Section 30, the auditor is appointed by the Chair of the Quarter Sessions for the county of Surrey. This role has been assumed by the Director of Corporate Services at Merton Council and the Director approved the appointment of Kreston Reeves on 5 February 2018. This was the fifth year that Kreston Reeves have carried out the audit and thank you for joining us this evening.

Finally, I would like to welcome past-Conservators, I am delighted you are able to join us this evening and would like to express our gratitude for the ongoing contribution that you have made over the years.

It was a privilege and honour to be re-elected as a Conservator last year and an even greater honour to serve as Chairman. I thank the Board for the confidence they have placed in me in renewing my appointment as Chairman for another year.

The Conservators and Chief Executive introduced themselves.

All questions would be taken at the end of the meeting, with the exception of the accounts where questions will be taken immediately following the presentation on the accounts.

2. Apologies

Chairman

Mr David Devons, Ms Prue Whyte

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting on 30 July 2021

Chairman

The Minutes of the meeting had been approved by the Board of Conservators and had been available on the Wimbledon and Putney Commons website. The Chairman asked for any comments on the minutes to be raised in the Q&A section at the end of the meeting and these would be recorded in the minutes of this meeting.

4. Chairman's Report

Chairman

Ladies and Gentlemen

Despite the strong temptation to do otherwise, it seems impossible to look back at the past year without looking through the opaque lens of the pandemic. And although the uncertainty and at times despair that has characterised the past two years seems to be slowly in retreat, one of the enduring legacies of the pandemic will almost certainly be the heightened sense of gratitude felt by all for the Commons, not only for the serenity but the stability they represent, particularly given the current unrest in the world.

Owing to the pandemic, the 150th anniversary of the date on which the 1871 Act received Royal Assent, 16 August 2021, was marked with respect but celebrated with restraint, with a service that was more solemn than celebratory, attended by a small cadre of staff and Conservators. Ironically, in many ways, there could not have been a more poignant way to reflect on this important occasion.

Community however is everything and we were therefore delighted that our postponed programme of events to collectively commemorate this important milestone was finally able to begin in earnest a few months ago. Sue Bucknall, who chairs our Friends Group, will be speaking more about this later but I would like to say that our programme of events has attempted to celebrate not only the tangible aspects of this unique resource but the intrinsic values it represents.

To that end, the spirit of mutual respect and harmony that is so key to the proper functioning of the Commons was a distinguishing feature of our Games Day held in May, with more than 600 participants, 50 captains and coaches, and a small army of supporters collectively participating in over 12 games and activities, including a family cycle led by Fleur Anderson, MP for Putney.

The delay in our 150th programme of events also meant that our celebrations coincided with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, which I hope you will agree was very clever planning on our part. Given the links between the Commons and the monarchy over the centuries, in many ways, this coincidence of celebrations could not have been more fitting. Our participation in the nation's beacon programme on the evening of 2 June provided the perfect opportunity for us to pay tribute to the Queen for the values she represents, her passion for outdoor pursuits, her love and understanding of nature and the importance of caring for one another and this country.

Our final event, an evening reception at the House of Commons, kindly hosted by Stephen Hammond MP for Wimbledon, will celebrate the important link between the Commons and Parliament over the years. I am delighted that Sir Richard Peek, direct descendant of Sir Henry Peek, the man who led the movement to establish the Commons under a separate Act of Parliament, as well as descendants of Richardson Evans and Sir Robert Hunter will be in attendance.

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

Needless to say, this diverse programme of events reflects the collective involvement of many and I am immensely indebted to all those who have made our celebration of this historic occasion so memorable.

Celebration of our 150th also provides an opportunity for us to reflect on the importance of the governance arrangements set out in the 1871 Act in fostering the unique sense of engagement between the community and the Commons. In an ongoing effort to further this engagement, the Board recognises the benefits inherent in increasing transparency and openness wherever possible. The Board therefore agreed to open the non-confidential part of Board meetings to the public and thanks all those who have supported this initiative.

The unique nature of the Commons extends not only to its history and governance but to its ecology, the fragility of which has been exposed by the pandemic. In recognition of this fact, we have prioritised the natural environment aspects of the Masterplan and the development of the Land Management Plan, which in the long-term may well prove to be the most important legacy of the 150th anniversary year. The Masterplan puts forward projects such as wetland planting around pond edges, bog improvement works, restoration and creation of meadows, opening up of horse rides, planting of native tree saplings and desilting of ponds. All will improve biodiversity and increase resilience and we are hoping to deliver a major habitat restoration project over the course of the next two years.

The Masterplan also identifies the need to invest in the footpaths whilst recognising the delicate balance between facilitating access, protecting the landscape and maintaining the natural state as far as possible. There is also a recognised need to improve signage and wayfinding to both increase accessibility and protect fragile habitats. Whilst facilitating access is important, the unique opportunity provided by the Commons to develop and practise navigation skills using natural landmarks mustn't be lost. We are planning to consult on the proposals for the natural landscape, including the footpaths and signage, later this year. I should add that signage is one of the most frequently commented upon topics and we recognise the impact it has both on visitors' experiences and the landscape.

To support our focus on this area, we have realigned our internal resources by bolstering our maintenance team and establishing dedicated fundraising capabilities to build on the high level of public goodwill that we are so fortunate to enjoy.

Whilst external funding is absolutely critical to deliver major capital works, we are continuing to examine the case for reforming the levy through a separate statutory instrument to support our day to day operating budget.

As we have previously stated, any proposal to reform the levy will be evidence based and take into consideration affordability considerations. Any proposal will also be subject to public consultation with key stakeholders, including levy-payers.

In addition to the natural landscape, the Masterplan also includes an evaluation of the built heritage, including an assessment of the important contribution made by the historic buildings. These include the Grade II listed windmill and the London Scottish Golf Club, as well as the historic monuments and cottages that are dispersed across the Commons. The plan highlights the substantial investment requirements of the built heritage, particularly the Richardson Evans Pavilion, named after the man who, through public subscription, saved 95 acres of what are now playing fields from development and donated them to the Commons.

The chronic underinvestment that the built heritage has suffered is due to both a lack of funding and in some cases a lack of constitutional clarity. Constitutional reform in this area is therefore necessary to provide a sound legal basis for future investment, ideally achieved through a scheme under the Charities Act. We continue to work with the Charity Commission on this

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

initiative, which will also require the support of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports. We are generously supported by two eminent local barristers, George Laurence QC and Francesca Quint on this endeavour, to whom we are indebted.

The 1871 Act very clearly sets out the duties of the Conservators but is less successful in conveying the enormity of the role. I am grateful for the commitment, time and dedication of all those with whom I serve, be they appointed by government departments or elected by levy-payers. In particular, I would like to thank Mike Rappolt, the MOD-appointed Conservator, whose long anticipated retirement from the Board is expected later this year. During his five years of service, he has most capably led the Audit and Risk Committee, for which I am grateful. I would also like to thank Mrs Sarah Wilton who has served as an external supporter of this committee for the insights, dedication and diligence that she has brought to this role over the past four years.

Although we have all witnessed the impact of the heavy usage of the Commons over the past two years, less obvious has been the invisible impact on the staff of working in an environment of continuous uncertainty, omnipresent health risks and environmental extremes. On behalf of the Conservators, I would like to thank all of the staff for their relentless effort in providing what has always been recognised by the local community as an essential service, even though it may have taken a pandemic to persuade the government to use this form of words. Their sense of duty and commitment has never been in question and we owe them all an enormous debt of gratitude. This is particularly true as they now face an intensive period of delivering all the works that were suspended during the pandemic in addition to the day to day management that is absolutely vital to keep the Commons functioning properly. We are particularly grateful to Steve Bound, the Chief Executive, who has capably led the team during these extraordinary times.

Finally, I would like to express our sincere appreciation to all of our volunteers, whether they serve on a committee or forum, don a florescent waistcoat whilst fording a stream or contribute in another fashion, be it picking up litter as part of a regular walk, or offering a quiet word of advice on difficult issues. Regardless of the form that their contribution takes, they all give their time generously, motivated by nothing more than a passion for the Commons and a sense of community and we are indebted to them. I would also like to reiterate my gratitude to all those who have supported us financially either in aid of a specific project or more generally, including membership of the Friends. The generosity of all our donors and supporters is humbling and every contribution will help protect the Commons for current and future generations.

Thank you.

5. Presentation on the Financial Statements

Nigel Ware

Good evening.

I am going to give a short presentation on the annual financial statements and I will take any questions on them at the end of my talk.

The financial statements themselves will be found starting on page 32 of the annual report and cover the year ended 31 March 2022.

The first item I must bring to your attention is a change to the draft annual report and financial statements that were published on our website earlier this month. The Conservators have identified an issue regarding the tax status of certain of the charity's income. As a result of this it has been necessary to reduce the income from charitable activities by £31,000 with a

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

consequent increase in the net expenditure before net gains on investments of a corresponding amount.

Moving on to the accounts generally, an important thing to remember about charity accounts is that there are two types of funds – unrestricted funds and restricted funds.

Restricted funds are those funds that have been given to the charity for a specific purpose and may only be used for that purpose. In our case the main restricted funds which resulted in income or expenditure during the year were the Horseride Appeal, the appeals for the two Beverley Brook bridges, the grant from the EW Cricket Trust for the cricket nets on Putney Heath and a donation towards the restoration of paths on Putney Heath.

All other funds received were unrestricted funds which can be used generally for the purposes of the charity. Within unrestricted funds it is possible for the Board at its discretion to designate funds for a particular purpose and the WPCC does this for Election Expenses. The next triennial election will be held in March 2024.

The Statement of Financial Activities is on page 32 of the annual report and shows the income and expenditure of the charity for the year.

The results are broken down into the two types of funds. If we look first at the restricted funds you will see that we started off the year with a balance of £71k, we received £80k of income in the year and spent £36k leaving a balance of £116k to be carried forward. The largest item of restricted expenditure related to the restoration of the horse exercise ring.

Moving on to the unrestricted funds. Our income this year was £1,889k which was £128k higher than last year reflecting the relaxation of Covid related restrictions. The main components of this increase were increases of £106k in income from sports facilities, an extra £22k from filming and fairs and an increase in the levy of £14k.

As I have explained in previous years, a consideration of our expenditure is complicated by the inclusion of a number of non-cash figures relating to the Local Government Pension Scheme, which I shall refer to as the LGPS. By non-cash I mean that these are items which under the relevant accounting standard are required to be charged as an expense in the Statement of Financial Activities but do not result in us having to make a physical payment to the pension scheme in respect of them. The contributions we actually pay to the LGPS are based on the detailed triennial actuarial valuations of the pension scheme which are determined on a different basis to that adopted for accounting purposes. At the last triennial valuation at March 2019 our share of the LGPS was in surplus. The next triennial valuation will be calculated at 31 March 2022 but the results of that valuation will not be known until early next year.

These additional non-cash costs amounted to £306k in the year ended 31 March 2022. On page 15 of the annual report, you will see that we have summarised the statement of financial activities in order to distinguish these non-cash LGPS costs. Ignoring these additional costs our expenditure on unrestricted funds was £1,926k which was a decrease of 5.1% in comparison with the previous year.

The main changes in expenditure were:

* An increase in property maintenance costs of some £66k as a result of expenditure that had been held over during the pandemic now taking place;

* A reduction in support costs of £280k as a result of a number of one off costs being incurred in the previous accounting year;

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

The overall result for the year was an operating loss of £37k before the non-cash items relating to the LGPS. This represented a considerable improvement from the operating loss of £269k suffered in 2021-21.

Taking the non-cash LGPS items into account we ended up with net expenditure of £343k for the year from which we deduct the gain of £147k on our investment portfolio and the actuarial gain on the LGPS of £782k which leaves us with a net increase of £587k in unrestricted funds for the year.

The balance sheet on page 33 shows that the charity's net assets before the LGPS liability were £3,229k at the year end which was £155k greater than at the end of the previous year.

We then have the pension scheme liability of £2,381k which reduces the net assets to £848k. The pension liability has gone down this year by £476k, the main reason being the increase in discount rates as a result of rising interest rates.

The cash flow statement on page 34 shows that our cash balances increased by £151k during the year which left us with bank balances at the year-end of £333k. In addition to our bank balances we have an investment portfolio which has this year produced a return of 11.6%. At the year end the value of our investments was £1,678k.

Looking ahead to the current financial year our costs are likely to be adversely affected by the increase in inflation and the one-off costs associated with consultation on the masterplan and levy. It is likely that we will suffer an operating loss before LGPS adjustments for this year.

That concludes my presentation on the financial statements and I will now take any questions that you may have.

Questions on the Accounts

Jonathan Calloway

Q. In the Cash Flow statement there was an item listed as "Sale of Investments - £100,000". Could Mr Ware elaborate on this. Also, more broadly, regarding the operating loss, will there be a need to increase the Levy further to address that. .

A. Mr Ware advised that some of the investment portfolio had been sold to fund cash flow requirements. With regard to the Levy, under the Statutory Instrument which sets the quantum of the Levy, the Levy is increased each year by the annual increase in the RPI from the previous September. WPCC has sufficient funds to carry out its work each year but not sufficient funds to invest in the infrastructure, such as the Richardson Evans Pavilion. In order to fund this and invest for the future, WPCC were looking at a general increase in the Levy, in addition to the annual increase.

Signing of the Financial Statements

There being no questions on the financial statements, all Conservators acknowledged their approval of the financial statements and, as required under Section 91 of the Commissioner's Clauses Act 1847, the Chairman and the Auditor signed the financial statements for 2021/2022. The Chairman also signed the Letter of Representation

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

6. Chief Executive's Presentation

Stephen Bound

Looking back over the year, it's great to be able to say that as we progressed through 2021 and into 2022, we increasingly saw a return to normality on the Commons. As restrictions were lifted, there were far fewer of the large gatherings that were a feature of the previous year – but that's not to say that the Commons haven't been busy. There is a general perception that the day-to-day visitor numbers have remained higher than they were pre-COVID.

Of course, these additional visitors have a physical and a financial impact. I'll let Pete talk about the impact on the land but aside from this, perhaps the most noticeable impact is the increase in the quantities of litter and waste that we have to dispose of – with the associated additional cost this creates. To give you some idea, in 2018/19 we spent £20,000 on litter and waste disposal. This year, the budget is over £41,000 – so our costs have more than doubled. On top of this, we have had to recruit an extra member of staff whose only role is to empty litter bins and dog waste bins. This is because we reached the point where our Maintenance team were having to empty bins twice per day – leaving little time that the other areas of their work such as habitat management, path repairs, grass cutting and tree safety.

The litter and waste operative isn't the only new member of the staff team. Over the autumn we recruited, for the first time on the organisation's history, a Fundraising Manager – and the successful candidate, Maggie May, started in January this year. As you know, WPCC is lucky to receive the levy, paid by local residents for the upkeep of the Commons. This is, and was always intended to be, our main source of income. However, we are increasingly finding that the levy doesn't cover our costs, particularly in relation to planned maintenance and capital investment. So we need to think hard about how we increase our income. One of the things we haven't been doing is making the most of our charitable status to maximise our revenue. There is more that we could be doing to bring in additional funds through grants, public appeals, donations or legacies. With Maggie on board, I am sure you will see us being much more active in our fundraising activities over the coming year.

And the great news is that we've already had some success. Those of you who use Putney Lower Common will know that the footbridge that crosses the Beverley Brook and that forms part of a popular circular walk, had been closed for some months because it needs repairs – to the tune of £15,000. We launched a public appeal in February to raise the funds needed – and we have exceeded our target. The repairs will take place over the summer and the bridge will reopen shortly afterwards.

And whilst on the subject of bridges, the wooden footbridge across the Beverley Brook adjacent to the REMPFF Playing Fields is, we hope, to be replaced this summer. The majority of the planning for this project and the fundraising to pay for it, have been undertaken by Thames Hare and Hounds Cross country club, and in particular one of their members, David Jenkins, so a big thank you to them for their support and commitment to this project.

These aren't the only access improvements worth mentioning. Those of you who walked here tonight may have noticed the excellent newly restored footpath between Putney Heath Road and the Church School next door. This work was undertaken by our Maintenance Team earlier this year, with the help of a very generous donation from the Elizabeth Frankland Moore and Star Foundation. We were also provided with some materials and equipment free of charge by Cappagh who are a civil engineering company based in Wimbledon who do a lot to support local charities.

Another positive during the year has been the return of events to the Commons – following a long COVID related hiatus. The Rosslyn Parks Schools Rugby 7s, the largest schools rugby tournament in the world – which had not been held since 2019, came back bigger than ever

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

before. And I think it's safe to announce that we are just finalising an agreement for the tournament to be held on the Common for the next five years. This is great as it gives us secure income and the tournament organisers the confidence to plan ahead. The income that we get from events such as the Rugby Sevens is a vital part of our revenue - so to be able to host events again is extremely important.

During the year the Board approved a new three-year Business Plan for the organisation. As you'd expect, some of the plan was a continuation of previous years' work. However, one of the new elements of the plan is a greater emphasis on conservation. Whilst I am sure many visitors think of the Commons as simply an attractive greenspace, the majority of the Commons are actually a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation because of their ecological value. So, as landowners and land managers, we have both a statutory and a moral duty to maintain and where possible improve this ecological value. As a result, we are looking over the coming years to carry out bigger and better conservation and habitat management works, and to help us achieve these ambitions, recruited an additional member of our Maintenance Team at the end of the last financial year. Pete, our Conservation Officer will say much more about the conservation projects we've already been undertaking in just a moment.

Finally, I'd like to end by thanking everyone for their support over the year. The longer I'm here the more I realise what an important role the Commons play in peoples' day to day lives and in their happiness and wellbeing. I'd like to thank everyone who has offered their help as volunteers and last, but certainly not least, I'd like to thank our incredibly committed and hard-working staff team who do such a great job of managing and maintaining these Commons for all of us.

7. Annual Conservation Report

Peter Haldane
Conservation & Engagement Officer

The Annual Conservation Report provides a summary of the conservation, volunteering and public engagement activities that have taken place on the Commons from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

Looking back over the previous Annual Conservation Report there were multiple references to the immense pressure that was brought to the Commons through the arrival of COVID-19.

While the Commons played a vital role in providing visitors with a free and accessible open space on which to exercise and recuperate during this period, there were certain negative implications that accompanied the increased popularity of the Commons:

- Wear and tear to footpaths and open habitats such as grasslands and heathland.
- Disturbance to wildlife
- Increase in incidents of unauthorised fires
- Dramatic increase in litter and fly-tips.

As a result of these issues and the presence of COVID-19, staff resources were stretched to the limits, volunteers were, in many cases, stood down, and certain routine tasks were provided with less attention than would normally have been the case.

This year's report is therefore a particularly important one as it not only provides details about much of the work that has been carried out on site, but it is also a celebration of the huge effort that has been provided by staff and volunteers to ensure the Commons have been returned to 'good health' after the immense disruptions of the previous year.

The report covers the following aspects:

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

- Heathland management
- Grassland management
- Woodland management
- Pond management
- The Beverley Brook
- Valley mires – Farm Bog and Stag Bog
- Management of Invasive non-native species
- Putney Lower Common
- Volunteering
- Public Engagement
- Reference to the forthcoming Land Management Plan

If anyone would like to read through this report it is available via the WPCCC but I would just like to run through a few of the salient points that are contained within the report.

Heathland Management - All the Commons' heathland is found on the Commons' SSSI which covers all of the land, apart from the REMPF, which is under the administration of the Conservators and south of the A3. This land covers 364.5 hectares out of the Commons' total area of 461 hectares. This same area of land is designated a Special Area of Conservation. Through a combination of historical factors which have included agricultural intensification, afforestation, urbanisation and the decline in traditional management techniques, the extent of heathland in the UK has, over the past 200 years, been dramatically reduced to only 16% of the coverage that was found during the 1800s. Currently, there are only 80 hectares of this habitat remaining on fragmented sites around London with the largest single expanse of heathland found on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath (20 hectares). Lowland heathland is an internationally important landscape which is listed as a priority habitat for conservation in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

At the current time, management of the Commons' heathland is carried out under the prescriptions of a five-year Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship agreement with Natural England.

Heathland Management operations from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022:

- Control and management of invasive trees/scrub bashing:
- Heather cutting
- Heather restoration
- Bracken bruising

Grassland management - There are approximately 36 separate parcels of grassland on Wimbledon and Putney Commons and there is a wide range of uses for which these areas are managed. These uses include sports fields, cricket pitches, a golf course, fairground sites and areas of general amenity.

In 2016, the grassland on the Commons were categorised through something called a National Vegetation Classification survey (NVC) where all areas of grassland were categorised as either acid grassland or neutral grassland.

While grassland on the Commons is not managed specifically for hay production, the management techniques that are increasingly being used on the Commons closely mimic those which have always been used in traditional meadow management. This includes leaving all areas of meadow grassland uncut until the end of the summer and then cutting, baling and removing all vegetation off site. This is alternatively known simply as cut and collect.

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

The reason for this work to be carried out is that regardless of the actual size of the meadow, management either through mowing or grazing is essential to maintaining a healthy structure, balance and diversity within the grassland setting. Without a suitable programme of management in place, grassland will simply become coarse and rank where it will lose both diversity and interest and eventually turn into scrub or woodland.

With regards to removing all the cut vegetation from each site, this work is carried out for two reasons. Firstly, many wild flowers prefer poor, nutrient lacking soil for germination and secondly, without the removal of dead material from the ground, this can lead to the suppression of certain wild flowers which could otherwise become established in these areas.

The practice of cut and collect has been employed on the Commons' three areas of acid grassland for over twenty years which has led to a vast improvement in the biodiversity of these sites. These areas include The Plain, Tibbet's Meadow and the small meadow site which is located along the southern section of Centre Path.

While this work has been carried out by outside contractors, in recent years, the Commons' Maintenance Team have also carried out a similar programme on a number of smaller sites on the Commons. From this year, another five large areas of grassland will also be included in our overall programme of cut and collect:

- West Place
- Wilberforce Field
- Putney Heath Fairground site
- Putney Lower Common Main Field
- Putney Lower Common Fairground site

Woodland Management - The woodland that is found on Wimbledon and Putney Commons covers an area of approximately 291 hectares and it is the largest habitat type that is found on the Commons. To help protect and enhance the Commons' woodland, over the past few decades there have been a series of important management agreements in place that have been jointly agreed by the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators, the Forestry Commission (FC) and Natural England (NE). At the current time, the Commons' woodland management programme is carried out under the guidance of a five-year Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship agreement.

As part of the Commons' involvement with the Forestry Commission Countryside Stewardship agreement, from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, the woodland management that has been carried out on the Commons has included the following activities:

- Holly thinning
- Ride management
- Hazel coppicing
- Woodland thinning and the creation of glades.
- The provision and management of deadwood habitats.
- Tree planting
- Tree safety
- The provision of public information
- The positioning of woodland bird boxes

Volunteering on the Commons - From 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, volunteers on the Commons provided a total of 5,489 voluntary hours to looking after the site. On the Commons we have always worked on the principle that every task which is carried by volunteers on this site provides a meaningful activity that is needed to help look after the Commons. Although the Commons volunteer programme may grow in the future, it should remain a top priority to

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

ensure that volunteering always benefits the actual needs of the Commons and in this way a real sense of purpose can be maintained among all of our many volunteers. At the current time we are very fortunate in having litter picking volunteers on the Commons on a daily basis and there is usually at least one organised weekly activity that takes place on site, although there may be a short waiting list to join at least some of these groups.

During this time the following groups provided help on the Commons:

- Weekend scrub bashing team
- Mid-week volunteer estate team
- Beverley Brook volunteer litter picking team
- Duke of Edinburgh volunteers
- Volunteer litter pickers
- Organised single session volunteer groups
- Farm Bog volunteers
- Wildlife recorders

London in Bloom - Currently in its 53rd year, the aim of London in Bloom is to increase community involvement, care for our environment and maintain our capital city's precious green spaces. Having been involved with the campaign since 2013, the Commons are relative newcomers to this worthy event but it is something that we now look forward to entering each year.

We were however delighted that during the award ceremony that is held during September each year, Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common were both presented with a Gold Award and Wimbledon Common was also voted by the judges as winner of the category of London Common of the year.

8. Update on the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons Sue Bucknall

The Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons bring together all of those who are connected by a passion for the Commons. Every path, heathland, bog, stream, pond and woodland has an incalculable value that requires ongoing investment. Without skilled conservation officers, mounted keepers and our very committed staff, our unique Commons would not be as they are today: safe, clean and preserved. That is why every contribution you make, small and large, is so important.

By becoming a Friend of Wimbledon and Putney Commons, you will be playing a crucial role in preserving, protecting and maintaining this unique and special place.

As a Friend, you will be invited to attend special events that will provide a unique experience of the Commons

We now have almost 600 members and their membership fees have enabled our officers to do much important work across the Commons. The Friends have also donated sums to help with the restoration of two bridges over the Beverley Brook, one near the Richardson Evans grounds and the other at Putney Lower Common.

As well as helping the Commons financially, the Friends have organised and enjoyed celebratory events for our 150th Anniversary.

In February, 150 people were able to enjoy a champagne afternoon tea in the debenture lounge of the AELTC. This venue was kindly given to us by the AELTC so that we could fund raise for the Commons which we did by auctioning unique Commons experiences, bird walks, a morning visiting the Stables followed by a guided tractor ride across the Commons with our

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

Conservation Officer followed by a picnic lunch, and drinks and canapés on the balcony of the Windmill.

I should like to thank the WPCC staff for making these possible and the people who bid so generously for them, again enabling us to fund much essential work.

In May, we finally held our Games Day to celebrate 150 years of games on the Commons. We were blessed with good weather and an excellent day was had by all. Over 1500 people attended and took part in various activities. Thanks to our corporate friend, Cappagh, and donations from the food and drink kiosks we were able to have a great day and make a profit for the Commons.

In June, the Friends helped organise the Queens Jubilee Beacon Procession. Some of us set off from the Roehampton War Memorial led by the vicar, Rev Joshua Rey, and another group walked from the Wimbledon War Memorial led by Wimbledon MP, Stephen Hammond. We all met at the Windmill, candles were lit and the service with music and the choir of St Mary's together with the illuminations of the Windmill ensured that a wonderful occasion, attended by over 1000 people, was a great success. Afterwards visitors enjoyed slices of the special Jubilee quiche kindly given and served by the Wimbledon tearooms.

In July the Friends will hold a reception at the House of Commons to mark the 150 years of WPCC with invited descendants of the early pioneers. Our Friends had priority access to tickets which sold out very quickly. So, if you missed out the answer is to join as a Friend which will also help keep our beautiful Commons open for all. Plans for the future include walks which will be free for members and a pub quiz, a special annual event for members and maybe the WPCC Friends book club - Wimbledon books only!

On that note I'd like to commend local author Nick Manning whose new book 'The Commoners' is a splendid read and Nick kindly donates £5 for each book sold to WPCC.

Back to the 'Art on the Commons'. Over the 10 months it has been running we have had over 1000 entries. Our May winner was the Putney cycle ride held on the Games Day. You have one day left to submit an entry for this month and then one last chance before the competition closes at the end of July. We look forward hopefully to an exhibition of winners and selected other entries. At this you will be able to vote for your favourite and thus select the 'People's Choice' overall winner.

Finally, we would like to thank again our Friends for their continued support and, to that end, the lovely Holland Park Opera donated 8 tickets to their special opera event to be held next month. All Friends were invited to enter a draw for the tickets to be announced tonight and the lucky winners are (in alphabetical order):

Peter Bull x1
Fiona Cowison x1
Belinda Leathes x2
Diane Roberts x2
Mary-Ann Turnbull x2

Thank you to all of the Friends Committee who work so hard on your behalf, to all our staff, especially Angela, without whom we could not exist, and especially to all our Friends.

Thank you

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

9. General Discussion and Questions

The Chief Executive read out questions that had been received in advance of the meeting:

Q. Prior to Covid, the Windmill Car Park opened at 6am. Whilst the change to 7.00am opening during Covid was understood, a decision appears to have been made to maintain the 7.00am opening. What is the rationale behind this decision and is there any proposal to return to previous dawn to dusk timings.

A. The Chief Executive responded that the staff had considered the car park opening times post-covid and the view of the Head Keeper was that it was better to have a Keeper on site longer in the afternoon when the Commons were busier, rather than early in the morning. There had only been two or three comments received from the public and the intention was to leave the opening time at 7am, unless a significant number of requests were received to change it. He noted that both the Telegraph and Springwell car parks were always open should visitors wish to arrive before 7am.

Q. A question relating to commercial dog-walking on the Commons and the reduction from six to four dogs on the commons of the professional dog walkers authorisation scheme. Could background information be given to the audience regarding the issue in relation to commercial dog-walking on the Commons, with particular attention to the support the Authorised Dog Walkers have received from the community/stakeholders/legal advice.

In addition, the Conservators added new evidence when they made their decision on 1 June and, as such, the dog-walkers should have the ability to respond to that evidence.

A. Under the Commons' Byelaws, only four dogs can be walked in any one group. However the Conservators can authorise people to walk more than four dogs. A scheme had been in place for over 20 years that allowed a number of, primarily commercial, dog-walkers to walk up to six dogs, with two onlead. In December 2021, the Board discussed the matter and took the decision to end the scheme once the current authorisations expired at the end of October 2022. Comments were received from the dog-walkers affected, and several of their customers who also wrote to express their concern. The dog-walkers had also forwarded a letter of comment from a local barrister, who primarily commented that the Conservators could have consulted the dog-walkers before making their decision. The Board therefore revoked the decision made in December 2021 and held a consultation meeting with the dog-walkers, and then reconsidered the matter at their meeting on 1 June. They reached the same decision to end the scheme in October 2022.

The Chief Executive was not aware of any new evidence presented at the meeting on 1 June, and the paper put to the Board was a public document and was available on the website prior to the meeting. Several dog-walkers were present at the meeting and had access to the papers. He thought that, having discussed the matter twice, the Board were unlikely to consider it again.

Q. Are the reasons for stopping the dog walking authorisations available on the website. Although not personally affected, he would like to understand the reasons for stopping the scheme after 25 years of operation.

A. The Chief Executive advised that the paper that went to the Board on 1 June 2022 was available on the website. The key reasons included:

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

- Allowing some people to walk six dogs sent a confusing message to other dog walkers
- Fairness – the Conservators are open to criticism about fairness in allowing some dog-walkers to walk up to six dogs but not others.
- Professional guidance – guidance for professional dog-walkers, endorsed by organisations such as the Dogs Trust and the RSPCA, contains advice that dogs should be walked in groups of no more than four. As charity Trustees, the Board have to have regard to professional guidance and consider it and, unless there was justification, follow that guidance.

Q. All the points raised by the Conservators have been counter-acted by the dog-walkers and that has not been put forward to the meeting. Several people disagreed with the guidance supported by the Dogs Trust and other issues that have been discounted by the dog-walkers but these were ignored.

A. The Chief Executive commented that was slightly unfair, he had acknowledged that the dog-walkers had raised some good points and counter arguments to some of the points raised, but not all of them. For example, the Dogs Trust guidance, no evidence had been presented that there was another dog welfare body saying that walking six dogs was appropriate. Likewise, there was nothing to suggest that some people some walking more than four dogs did not cause confusion.

Q. Those walking six dogs without a permit knew that they were in breach of the byelaws and it was unlikely that members of the public had more than four dogs. Most of these walked from the Robin Hood Road car park. Merton had brought in a rule of no more than four dogs but this was no longer enforced and withdrawing the authorisations would not resolve that problem. Arguably Keepers would have to do more policing.

A. The Chief Executive responded that there would still be an enforcement role for the Keepers, their job was to enforce all the Byelaws.

Q. When this issue was looked at several years ago, the scheme was going to be phased out over time and in that time, the numbers had already reduced by six so that would have worked.

A. The Chief Executive commented that there was no way of knowing when dog-walkers would give up their authorisation. It was one of the elements of having a changing Board that views changed.

Q. Now that there were only 19 authorised dog-walkers surely it wouldn't be difficult for the Keepers to recognise them on the Commons and to know they were authorised.

A. The Chief Executive commented that there was still the issue of the others seeing them walking six dogs and there may still be an assumption that six are allowed.

Q. The Scheme has been running for 25 years with no issues and considers that the role of the Conservators is to look after the Commons and not be concerned about dog welfare. The guidelines were not law. All the dog walkers looked after the dogs in their care and there had rarely been incidents. The owners were all aware that their dogs were walked in a group of six and had no concerns.

A. The Chairman commented that, as Trustees of a charity they had a duty under the Charities Act to follow guidance of professional associations and bodies and it was their view that dogs

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2022

should not be walked in groups of more than four. That was a key consideration when the Board made their decision. When the original decision was made to phase out the scheme in early 2020 they were prepared to take a longer trajectory but having reconsidered, and with new members on the Board, there were ongoing concerns over the identification problem, not only for the keepers but for other users of the Commons. When the new Board reconsidered the matter, they could not support the longer-term approach given their need to follow professional guidance.

She reiterated that in no way was there a sense that the authorised dog-walkers did not comply with the current scheme. They set a high standard and acted as good ambassadors setting good standards. The Board recognised the importance of commercial dog-walkers but putting dog welfare at the heart of their decision and following professional guidance was a key part of the decision making process.

Q. It was reiterated that the guidance was just that, it was not law. And insurance companies provided insurance for up to six dogs.

A. The Chairman repeated that the Conservators, as charity Trustees, needed to adhere to professional guidance.

There being no further questions, the Chairman concluded the formal part of the meeting but thanked Angela Evans-Hill, Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive and Communications Officer, for arranging and managing the meeting.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting at 9.25pm.