

# Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2023

## Minutes of the Conservators' ANNUAL OPEN MEETING held at the Community Church, Werter Rd, Putney SW15 2LL on Wednesday 28 June 2023

Conservators:	Diane Neil Mills, Elected (Chairman) Sue Bucknall, Elected Peter Hirsch, Elected Michael Johnston, Elected Peter Shortt, Appointed Ministry of Defence Nigel Ware, Appointed Home Office Oliver Bennett MBE, Appointed Defra
Officers:	Peter Haldane, Conservation & Engagement Officer
Auditor:	Simon Webber, Kreston Reeves LLP
Apologies:	David Hince, Elected
In attendance	31 Levy-payers and other members of the general public

### 1. Welcome

Chairman

Good evening

On behalf of the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators, it is my great pleasure to welcome everyone to the 2023 Annual Open Meeting this evening. We are grateful to the Community Church for allowing us to use their church for this evening's meeting.

I would also like to give a 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 sixth year that Kreston Reeves have carried out the audit and we thank you Simon very much for joining us this evening.

And finally, I'd like to welcome past conservators. We are absolutely delighted that you have joined us this evening. We'd like to express again our sincere gratitude to you for the ongoing contribution that you have made over the years. Thank you very much.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it was an absolute privilege and honour to be elected a Conservator and a even greater honour to serve as the chairman. I thank the Board for the confidence they have placed in me by renewing my appointment as Chairman for another year. It's definitely one of the most challenging roles I have taken on in my life yet equally one of the most rewarding.

Conservators and Conservation & Engagement Officer introduce themselves.

Regarding Questions, all questions except those in relation to the accounts will be taken at the end of the meeting and questions on the accounts, the formal approval by the Conservators and the signing of the accounts will all follow the presentation of the financial statements. Names will be recorded with questions in the minutes unless you ask otherwise.

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### 2. Apologies

Chairman

Conservator, Mr David Hince, past-Conservator, Mr Mike Rappolt

### 3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting on 29 June 2022

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,

I last stood before an audience in his magnificent hall in January 2018 as a candidate in the WPCC elections and as a result of the events that unfolded following that evening, I have had the immense privilege of chairing this wonderful organisation for the past five years. Although each of these years has been unique in terms of the specific challenges and opportunities, all have been underpinned by the same deep passion that is felt by all for the Commons.

This past year, which has been extraordinary in so many ways, will clearly be remembered as one of collective celebration and commemoration. For alongside the long-awaited events marking the Commons' 150th anniversary, we participated in the national celebration of the late Queen's Platinum Jubilee and then tragically, just three months later, we found ourselves in a state of disbelief as we mourned her death. Nine months later we celebrated the coronation of her eldest son, a man whose commitment to the environment has in so many ways shaped his life, through a programme of events that reflected both his beliefs in the value of diversity and the importance of service.

All three events reinforced the importance of the Commons in providing an open space in which the community can come together, to share memories of the past and aspirations for the future.

Despite of, or perhaps because of, the delay, the celebration of our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary was marked with an outpouring of community spirit and a heightened sense of gratitude for this special open space.

The occasion was celebrated by a number of events designed to capture the many facets of life on the Commons, of which I will highlight three:

The first was Games Day – As the 1871 Act clearly states, the Commons were created for the purposes of recreation and exercise. There could not, therefore, have been a more fitting way of celebrating the 150th anniversary than by bringing together representatives of the games that have been played on the Commons over the decades. The event brought together over 600 participants, 50 captains and coaches, and an army of supporters collectively participating in over 12 games and activities, ranging from cricket and cross country running to lacrosse, which I found of particular interest given that it was the Canadians who introduced lacrosse to this country, on Wimbledon Common, in 1875.

We are enormously grateful to all those who helped organise and support the day and to the many participants who threw themselves energetically into the events.

Second was the House of Commons Reception - Held in the Terrace Pavilion on the most perfect July evening, the event provided an opportunity to pay tribute to those who were

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instrumental in securing the future of the Commons under an Act of Parliament. We were therefore delighted to have Sir Richard Peek, a direct descendant of Sir Henry Peek, as the guest speaker, as well as descendants of Richardson Evans in attendance. The event, kindly hosted by Stephen Hammond MP, also presented an opportunity to celebrate the special bond between the Commons and Parliament and as always, we are most grateful to Stephen for his support.

And third was Art on the Commons – brainchild of Conservator Sue Bucknall, Chairman of the Friends, this celebration of the beauty of the Commons through the seasons was created in the darkness of the pandemic, when physical contact was restricted and opportunities to collectively celebrate severely limited. The event was so successful that it has been continued into a second year and may well prove to be the most enduring legacy of the 150th celebrations.

The past year also saw the completion of a number of projects that marked these important milestones including a bridge repair and the planting of an orchard in Putney Lower Common as well as a much-needed bridge replacement at the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields, opened in near Arctic conditions in December, and testing the freezing point of bag pipes in the process.

All projects were made possible thanks to the generosity of local residents and organisations and we are enormously grateful to them all for their support.

Building on the recognised need to increase the resilience of the Commons, we continued over the year to prioritise the natural environment aspects of the emerging Masterplan. Public consultation on the draft document was successfully carried out this past autumn, which demonstrated strong support for the proposed projects. The work in this area is being further progressed through the development of a meticulously detailed Land Management Plan, under the leadership of our Conservation and Engagement Officer, Peter Haldane. The work is supported by the Wildlife and Conservation Forum and we thank all those who give so freely of their time to support this initiative.

The second stage of the Masterplan includes an assessment of the historic buildings and monuments, and the associated investment requirements. The chronic underinvestment that the built heritage has suffered reflects 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 initiative, generously supported by two eminent local barristers, George Laurence KC and Francesca Quint, to whom we are indebted. I would also like to thank Asif Malik, who has recently retired from his role as Chairman of the Windmill Museum after five years of outstanding service. As a qualified architect with particular interest in historic buildings, Asif also made a valuable contribution as a member of the Masterplan Steering Committee and I am personally grateful to him and his wife Frances for all that they have done for the Commons.

Over the year, we also continued to examine the case for rebasing the levy, which we believe is necessary to enable us to properly fulfil our statutory responsibilities to care for and protect this much cherished asset. Through public consultation, we tested support in principle for increasing the levy with an indicative increase of £8 per year for a Band D property. Despite the economic difficulties that we as a nation face, the proposal received very strong support, a reflection of the great affection that is felt by all for the Commons and we are grateful to everyone for their support. Subject to gaining support from the relevant authorities, we hope to further progress this initiative in the next six months, including public consultation with all 41,000 households in the levy area.

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In March we announced with great regret the decision of our Chief Executive, Stephen Bound, to relocate to the Lake District. Stephen's interest in and focus on the natural environment has been reflected in the works that have been prioritised over the past two years in particular. On behalf of the Conservators, I would like to record our sincere appreciation to him for all he achieved over his seven years with us. He is deeply missed by the Conservators, the staff and all those who had the privilege to work with him.

I am however pleased to announce that we have recently appointed a new Chief Executive who will be joining us in September. We will be making a formal announcement of his appointment at that time.

Most of our staff are long-serving and all are totally dedicated to the Commons, and none more so than Bill Rowland, who this year celebrated 40 years with us. Yet despite his formidable service record, Bill's enthusiasm, loyalty and commitment to the Commons remains as strong today as it was 40 years ago and he continues to serve as a highly valued and deeply respected member of the team. Thank you Bill.

Although the duties of the Conservators could not be better articulated than through the wonderful Victorian prose of the 1871 Act, the words fail to convey 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, and I thank them all for their contribution.

In his absence, I would particularly like to thank Mike Rappolt, the MoD-appointed Conservator, who retired in August. Mike will be remembered in particular for his leadership of the Audit and Risk Committee. The role has now been taken up by Peter Shortt, who brings with him extensive experience with the MoD and we welcome him to the Board.

Supporting the work of this committee for over five years has also been a dedicated and diligent member of the local community, Mrs Sarah Wilton, and I would like to record our appreciation for her contribution, which is highly valued by Conservators and staff.

It was with deep sadness that we learned of the passing of Sir Robert Andrew on 31 January 2023. Sir Robert was one of the longest serving Conservators, being appointed by the Secretary of State for Defence in 1973 and serving continuously until his retirement following 36 years of distinguished service. We were honoured to have Sir Robert join us at the House of Commons for our celebration last July. He is remembered with great respect and fondness by all those who knew him.

In closing, I would once again like to express my sincere appreciation to our tireless staff, for the upkeep, protection and day to day management of the Commons that they so capably and selflessly provide. I also pay tribute to our volunteers, whether they serve on a committee or forum, clear scrub from the heathland or contribute in another way, many of whom do so anonymously. Regardless of the form that their contribution takes, they all give generously of their time, motivated by nothing more than a love of the Commons.

Finally, I thank 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 the public goodwill that it represents is humbling and we are enormously grateful to everyone for their support.

Thank you.

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## 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 36 of the annual report and cover the year ended 31 March 2023.

As I explain each year, an important thing to remember about charity accounts is that there are two main 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. Details of the restricted funds will be found on pages 52 to 53 of the financial statements from which you will see that there have been 12 restricted fund projects during the year, an increase of 50% over the previous year. This increase in activity on restricted funds has been as a result of our Fundraising Manager who joined at the beginning of 2022 successfully bidding for funds for specific purposes. The main restricted fund projects which resulted in income or expenditure during the year were the Horseride Appeal, the two Beverley Brook bridges, the new cricket nets on Putney Heath, the bog restoration feasibility project, the Putney Lower Common orchard and the start of fundraising for the Queensmere restoration project and the re-launch of the Access for All appeal which aims to improve priority footpaths on the commons.

All other funds that the charity 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 WPC does this for Election Expenses. The next triennial election will be held in March 2024 and I shall again be acting as Returning Officer. So, I urge those of you who are budding conservators to seriously consider standing for election – further details about the process will be made available in the autumn.

The Statement of Financial Activities is on page 36 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 £116k, we received £155k of income in the year and spent £91k. There was then a transfer to £90k to unrestricted funds in respect of those restricted funds which had been given for the purpose of enabling us to acquire fixed assets – this related mainly to the Wimbledon Common Bridge over the Beverley Brook and the cricket nets on Putney Heath. The overall effect of these transactions was a reduction in restricted funds of £25k. A reduction sounds as though it is a bad thing but this is not the case as restricted funds are given for a specific purpose, spent and then they are gone.

Moving on to the unrestricted funds. Our income this year was £2,018k which was £129k higher than last year. The main component of this increase was an increase of £61k in the levy.

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

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based on the detailed triennial actuarial valuations of the pension scheme which are determined on a different basis to that adopted for accounting purposes.

On page 19 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. These additional non-cash costs amounted to £297k in the year ended 31 March 2023.

Our total expenditure for the year before the non-cash costs amounted to £2,166k an increase of £200k. We have this year suffered from an increase in the general level of costs as a result of the high level of inflation that regrettably is still prevailing within the economy. The principal components of the increase in costs are explained on page 20 and are an increase of £98k in commons maintenance costs, a decrease in property maintenance and improvement costs of £42k and an increase in support costs of £120k.

Turning now to the LGPS itself.

The results of the last triennial actuarial valuation as at 31 March 2022 became available earlier this year – yes it takes actuaries a year to come up with the final result - and at that date our share of the LGPS was a surplus of £1,090k even though for accounting purposes we had a deficit of £2,381k at the same date.

For accounting purposes at 31 March 2023, i.e. a year later, our pension scheme position had changed from a deficit of £2,381k to a surplus of £347k. A turnaround during the year of £2,728k, although as the financial statements explain we have not for the sake of prudence recognised the surplus of £347k. So, we end up with a position on the financial statements where the assets of the LGPS equal the liabilities. The reason for this extraordinary turnaround is primarily because of the increase in the discount rate used to measure the pension scheme liabilities from 2.6% to 4.8%. And the consequence of the turnaround is that we have an actuarial gain on the pension scheme recorded on the statement of financial activities of £2,678k.

The overall result for the year was an operating loss of £57k before the non-cash items relating to the LGPS which compares with an operating loss in the previous year of £37k.

Taking the non-cash LGPS items into account we ended up with net expenditure of £354k for the year to which we add a loss of £59k on our investment portfolio and the actuarial gain on the LGPS of £2,678k which leaves us with a net increase of £2,355k in unrestricted funds for the year.

The balance sheet on page 37 shows that the charity's net assets at the end of the year were £3,178k compared with £848k at the previous year end. Again, the main reason for the turnaround was the enormous actuarial gain.

I should point out that once interest rates fall to a more normal level, as the Bank of England hopes, it is probable that the LGPS will again fall into deficit for accounting purposes.

The cash flow statement on page 38 shows that our cash balances increased by £52k during the year, albeit that this figure was struck after a realisation of £150k from our investment portfolio, which left us with bank balances at the year-end of £384k. In addition to our bank balances we have an investment portfolio which has this year produced an income return of £47k but a total return of minus 0.9%. At the year end the value of our investments was £1,469k.

Looking ahead to the current financial year our costs are likely again to be adversely affected by the persistently high level of inflation and one-off costs associated with a potential

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consultation on the levy. Therefore, 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

#### Alan Carr

**Q.** I noticed that the office is on land that is leased which surprised me. Did I misread that?

**A.** NW advised that the Maintenance Shed which is adjacent to Wimbledon Common Golf Club is on a bit of leased land. The Office is very much on the land that WPCC own.

#### John Lease

**Q.** Putting aside the pension position, am I right in thinking the real assets available to the Conservators is the cash at the end of the year, £384,000, plus the invested funds?

**A.** NW responded that WPCC had a cash balance £384,000 plus £1.4 million of investments but there was also £1.3 million of Levy income which was paid monthly during the year. Our cash flow is quite substantial as you can see from the accounts. We also bring in some £300,000 a year from the sports pitches and we have other general sources of income.

Whilst those are our liquid resources at a given point in time, they vary from week to week. The key thing is that we are running at operating loss because the income is simply not enough. That's why we are looking at the increase in the Levy to set the Charity on its way for the next generation. We need to take steps if we are to maintain the Commons to an acceptable standard.

### Signing of the Financial Statements

There being no further 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 2022/23. The Chairman also signed the Letter of Representation.

## 6. Operations Report given by Peter Haldane, Conservation & Engagement Officer

During 2022, overall visitor numbers to the Commons remained extremely high.

Although we are very proud that the Commons can play such an important role in the lives of the community, providing people with a safe and welcoming space for relaxation and recreation, high visitor numbers do place additional pressures on our resources.

Path erosion and trampling of sensitive habitats remain a significant issue and increased numbers of people and dogs bring higher quantities of litter and waste to the Commons.

As a result, our waste management expenditure, which increased five-fold during lockdown has remained considerably higher than it was three years ago and like the rest of the country, we have been subject to the significant price inflation that has been experienced over the past 12 months, further straining our already limited budgets.

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Yet, despite these issues, over the past year, the dedication and hard work of Commons staff and volunteers has been exemplary.

For the management of the Commons natural habitats, this has involved some very impressive work in all areas of the Commons which include Wimbledon Common, Putney Heath and Putney Lower Common.

While all the work carried out in these areas has been outstanding, of particular note has been the woodland management activities that have been carried out on Wimbledon Common, the ongoing scrub bashing on Putney Heath which involved the help of 56 separate volunteer groups after a significant lull in heathland operations during the covid restrictions of 2019 and 2020, and the planting of a small orchard on Putney Lower Common.

In terms of the events that were held on the Commons during the past year, this has also provided another important aspect to the overall management of the Commons. During March 2023, the Rosslyn Park Schools Rugby Sevens took place at the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields. This event is the largest schools' rugby tournament in the world. This year's event was the largest yet with over 2,000 matches being played over five days. Despite heavy rainfall in the weeks leading up to the tournament, followed by thousands of rugby players and their supporters churning up the ground, it is to the credit of the Commons' Grounds Manager and his team that within a very short time after the end of the tournament, those same fields were made ready for the next round of games which initially included football and then cricket and athletics.

In March 2023 we entered into a five-year agreement with Rosslyn Park Rugby Club to hold the Rosslyn Park Schools Rugby Sevens tournament at the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields for the next five years. This is fantastic news for both parties and secures much needed income from the event for WPCC in the medium term.

Other events that were held on the Commons during 2022 included a Games Day that was conceived as a way to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the Act of Parliament that created the Commons 'for the purposes of exercise and recreation', the Weekend of Nature in June, the Commons' summer evening walk in July, carols at the Windmill in December, our Winter talk in February and more besides.

In terms of enhancing access across the Commons, autumn 2022 saw the installation of a replacement footbridge across the Beverley Brook close to the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields and restoration of the footbridge across the Beverley Brook on Putney Lower Common. Both projects were made possible by generous donations from visitors and stakeholders of the Commons.

Thanks to a generous donation from the Elizabeth Frankland Moore and Star Foundation, along with assistance from local firm Cappagh, we were also able to complete restoration of the footpath which leads from the pedestrian crossing on Putney Heath to Roehampton Church School and Holy Trinity Church.

With so much having been achieved on the Commons during the past year, it was especially gratifying that all the effort that is made by staff and volunteers to the upkeep of these Commons was once again recognised by a judge from London in Bloom which is an independent charity and part of Britain in Bloom.

Focusing on the key issues of horticultural achievement, environmental responsibility and community participation, the Commons have been involved with the annual London in Bloom campaign since 2013 and each year Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common have been entered as separate entries into the category of London Commons.



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During 2022, we were delighted that both entries received a Gold Award and Wimbledon Common was also voted by the London in Bloom judges as London Common of the year.

A Gold Award is provided to entries that have demonstrated an exceptionally high standard throughout the London in Bloom judging process and have consistently demonstrated both best practice and sustainable effort in all the judging criteria and objectives provided by the London in Bloom campaign.

### 6. Annual Conservation Report

**Oliver Bennett**

Good evening. I am the DEFRA-appointed Conservator so I have a particular focus on the natural environment and it is a great privilege to hold this role. I am an environmental scientist by background and in my day job I run the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

I'll be talking about some of the conservation work that has taken place over the past year.

As you may know, large parts of the Commons are protected by various pieces of legislation. They were made a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1953, making it one of the finest and oldest protected areas in England. And in 2004, the level of environmental protection was increased in recognition of the Commons' internationally important heath and stag beetle population.

All these laws place legal duties on the Conservators to protect, conserve and enhance the natural environment of the commons, while also helping the community to enjoy them.

To protect the nature of the commons, over the past several years we have been working on a land management plan. This plan will for the first time help us to explain how we will protect the nature of the commons for future generations to enjoy and we hope this will be ready this year. Alongside this important planning work, we have been delivering significant amounts of day-to-day conservation, delivered by Conservation and Engagement Officer, Peter Haldane, and his colleagues. This includes the creation of glades in the woodland, ride management, heather cutting, invasive species control, wildflower meadow management and pond protection. This work is all critical to maintain the important habitat and species that we have on the site.

It is important to note that a significant amount of this work has been done with the help of the local community. Volunteers play a huge role on the Commons, and gave an estimated 8000 hours of their time last year. We're sincerely grateful to all our volunteers for all their hard work.

In addition to these activities, local people have also generously helped with fundraising projects for green and conservation works, for example, as part of the Queen's Green Canopy tree planting initiative, we planted a small orchard on Putney Lower Common. And generously giving for the path restoration campaign. Well-maintained paths are important for nature conservation reasons as they encourage people to stick to the paths in sensitive areas and prevent accidental trampling of the wildlife.

Over the past year the Wildlife and Conservation Forum, which I chair, has also been very active.

The Forum is a group of volunteers and staff who lead on wildlife monitoring and conservation, and they help to deliver an annual programme of nature events with help from Angela Evans Hill, our Executive Assistant and Communications Officer.

For example, we arranged for an excellent winter pond talk from the Freshwater Habitats Trust. And a few weekends ago we held a Weekend of Nature that had moth trapping, a nature

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walk, a bat walk, small mammal trapping and stalls from the Quekett Microscopical Club and Reptile Events.

We have some events coming up later this year if you are interested. For example, if you would like to join me and other nature enthusiasts on a walk to record Butterflies and Dragonflies, please take a look at the events section on the website for further information.

Some of the other things the forum did in 2022 included transplanting a locally-rare plant called Cross-leaved heather to a part of the Common where it had been lost.

We also discovered nine new moth species, taking the total number of moth now recorded on the common to 432. This included one of the UK's largest moths, the Emperor Moth, which is the only kind in the UK that spins a silk cocoon.

We also recorded 88 bird species including two very rare Dartford Warblers, which live on heathland. We recorded 28 species of butterfly, which was a slight increase on 2021. However, the long drought last year may have caused problems for many butterflies and other invertebrates as their food plants will have suffered. The Forum is currently monitoring the numbers of butterflies this year to see what the impact has been.

I would like to take this opportunity to give my heartfelt thanks to all the volunteers who help on the forum.

That brings me to the end of my talk. If you are interested in getting involved in volunteering or recording wildlife there are some sign up sheets at the back of the room. You can also find out how to get involved on our website, or by following me or WPCC on Twitter.

Thank you.

### **7. Update on the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons Sue Bucknall**

Good evening and thank you for coming along to the meeting this evening.

In the Act of Parliament of 1871 which established Wimbledon and Putney Commons, the Conservators of the Commons were mandated to “protect and preserve the Commons and to keep it open for all for the purposes of recreation and exercise.”

152 years later we Conservators still aspire to do the same and the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons help us to do so in two particular ways.

Firstly, as Diane has mentioned, by raising much-needed funds to help ensure that the work continues. We now have over 600 memberships, half of which are family memberships, and every pound given via the membership fees helps to protect and preserve the Commons.

The Friends also hold fundraising events and recently we have been able to contribute towards larger projects which our first ever fundraising manager, Maggie, has successfully managed to fund through grants and donations.

This year the Friends contributed to “Bill’s Bridge” and the Orchard, both on Putney Lower Common. We now intend to help with the much needed repair of many of our paths which have suffered so much, particularly through increased usage throughout the pandemic.

Secondly the Friends help bring together the whole community for joint celebrations. We work with partners who, like us, love the Commons, for the benefit of all. For example, during the Games Day mentioned by Diane, we held the first family cycle ride from Putney to the Windmill led by Fleur Anderson MP and also hosted sports for people with disabilities which was very inspiring to watch.

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During the Coronation we hosted a Big Help Out day as requested by the King when we were joined by many local charities and scout groups celebrating their work and looking for volunteers. Stephen Hammond MP visited all of the stalls but the star of the afternoon was Wandle the Womble who led a Commons' wide litter pick. At one point we had given out 120 litter pick up sticks and a large queue of people were waiting for their turn so that they could join in. Much fun was had by all and the Commons looked very clean!

Last Sunday we worked with the Windmill Museum's Pop-Up Picnic designed for people to bring sharing plates of food reflecting all of our different cultures.

We also continue with our Friends' walks and have recently supported our partners to establish a "Walk and Talk" group at the Wimbledon end of the Commons. This brings together people who may feel alone and who do not necessarily normally walk on the Commons. They meet old friends and make new ones. If the trial is successful, we hope to work with Putney and Roehampton partners to establish a second one in the Putney/Roehampton area.

In the meantime, please do consider joining as a Friend. We would love to have you on board to help us maintain and celebrate our wonderful Commons.

Coming back to our Art on the Commons competition which is open to everyone; in our inaugural year we had over 1500 entries! All of the monthly winners and runners-up were exhibited in an exhibition in the barn where the public voted for the overall winner and this is the winter winner for this year (SB held up a copy of the picture).

We have recently chosen a winner for Spring 2023. The lucky prize winner has a meal with wine for four people at the Spencer.

And finally, before a short reminder of our Coronation event, I would like to thank our small but brilliant Friends committee Belinda, Diane, Angela, Maggie and David and all of the Friends who support us. (A video montage of the coronation event was then played)

### 9. General Discussion and Questions

**Q.** Jenny Forrest.

This is for the Defra Conservator. I have been walking on the Common for over 60 years now, and for most of those if anybody so much as touched a piece of wood, a Ranger would appear from nowhere and made sure you didn't. Over the last few years, the den building has been increasing. What worries me is every time I see a den, I see a dead bird. All the wood that was left to rot is now moved on a daily basis. Should something be done about this?

**A.** OB responded: Thank you very much for the question and I think Peter would probably want to comment on this. The dead wood is a very important habitat on the Commons and is part of the important management as well for the Stag beetle population, which is what the Commons are protected for. So, we know that we do have an issue around den building and the team do dismantle dens whenever they come across them.

Peter Haldane added that, as with everything on the Commons, it's a balancing act. A lot of heath and woodland management is about retaining dead wood which is used to create habitat for the stag beetles. The Keepers are instructed to dismantle the dens, particularly when they get too large, but it is also important to allow children to have the chance to play and explore in nature.

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Ms Forrest added that there did seem to be a lot of adults involved and there were an increasing number of incidents with live trees being stripped. PH responded that that was not acceptable and this should be reported to the Ranger's Office immediately.

OB added that the Wildlife and Conservation Forum had recently been joined by an entomologist who is studying the beetles of the Commons. He's actually found some quite unusual species associated with dead wood. Many of the species on the Commons require dead wood.

### David (no surname)

**Q.** I have heard that the issue of rough sleepers is increasing on the Commons. Is this true and is it an issue being dealt with?

PH responded. We have had periods of time when rough sleepers have been an issue but that has not been the situation lately. If we do come across them, they are either moved on or if they are considered to be vulnerable then we have an outreach group who we can call to come and assist them. To my knowledge, it's not increasing at all and it's not a major issue at this particular time.

The Chairman read out a question that had been submitted in advance of the meeting. The question was received from Mark Upton.

**Question received in advance of the meeting:** Mark Upton. Considering that in the public vote, the professional licensed dog walkers won the support of the public and also the professional licensed dog walkers won the support of other Stakeholder groups and a local barrister who is acting at a personal capacity. With the Board now accept the value of the addition support of our local MP to have all licenses renew, considering the questionable neglectable benefits against the harm done to our established businesses and local clients particularly in the light of the current cost of living crisis?

**A. The Chairman responded** First, I would like to thank Mr Upton for the question, and I would make a point of clarification that the public consultation that the Conservators conducted in late 2019 was to really understand the views of the public and not intended to be a vote or referendum but it certainly was taken into consideration by the Conservators in their decision-making process.

In answer to the question, if the Conservators received representation from an MP or any other person or organisation, we would of course give it due consideration and if we felt it necessary we would reconsider our decision. I think it worth noting that the Conservators' decision to end the special authorisation that permitted the walking of more than 4 dogs by certain individuals that was taken in June 2022 was really based on three key factors. The most important of which was the professional guidance that was published by the Pet Industry Federation and endorsed by organisations including the RSPCA and the Dogs Trust that, in the interests of dog welfare, no more than 4 dogs should be walked together in a group and that was very much paramount in our minds. As charity trustees we have a duty to respect professional guidance.

We also did consider the confusion that this policy causes both to visitors to the Commons and our enforcement team since it's not easy to identify the small number that had authorisation to walk more than 4 dogs.

The third consideration was really fairness to all the professional dog walkers and there is a large group that did not have the special permission to walk more than 4 dogs but the overriding consideration was the professional guidance that had been issued on this matter.

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I think it's probably important to say that we recognise the enormously important role that commercial dog walkers provide in the interest of dog welfare for those who aren't able to exercise their dogs for whatever reason, and certainly the decision taken by the Conservators was not a reflection of any sense that the rules hadn't been respected. It was principally driven by the respect and acknowledgement of the professional guidance on the matter, and it was really dogs welfare that we had at heart.

### David Cox

**Q.** On a recent and regular walk around the Common, I saw a young lady taking some water out of Rushmere pond. She explained that it was part of a survey for Great Crested Newts and that the feedback would come back to the Conservators at some time. She had also commented that there had been three specialists on the Common that morning and during one of their walks they had found a very small rare cockroach. I wondered whether any feedback had been received.

**A.** OB responded. I was not aware of the cockroach but I'm sure that information will filter through. The lady is from the Fresh Water Habitat Trust and she was the person that gave the Ponds talk earlier this year and she will be sharing her data with us. We are actually keen to get some testing kits so we can test the other ponds on the Commons and actually what she was doing was taking water to do a DNA sample of the water to see which animals are in it so including GCN but there are various other species that you can test for.

All the information that we gather either through the Forum members or other visitors to the Commons is compiled in our Monitoring Reports which are published on the website.

PH added that the gentleman who found the cockroach was likely to be the entomologist that was mentioned earlier. So far he had found over 33 different species of beetles on the Commons, many of which are nationally scarce. They are also associated with deadwood habitats and it's good to know that the work that we are carrying out on the woodland and the heathland is benefiting certain species.

**Q.** I'm interested in fairly recent initiatives, one of which is quite a large area of bare soil near the Roehampton War Memorial which I think is an experiment in establishing new heather and the other is the ring of branches. Could you tell me what the verdict is so far?

**A.** PH responded that the area on Putney Heath was the last area north of the A3 where heather had grown but had died away. The Maintenance Team have, over recent years, been cutting and collecting the grass and vegetation, trying to lower the nutrient level there so that heather seed and cuttings from elsewhere on the Commons could be transplanted there.

Heather is a slow grower and it will take a few years to know if it has been successful.

The ring of branches sits on an area of wet heath where a small pond is forming. We have taken some of the cut scrub and created a dead hedge around this area to protect it from trampling. It is only a semi-permanent pond but it attracts a lot of wildlife in the few months each year that it forms.

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 9.20pm