



Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators

Annual Open Meeting 27th June 2018

Chairman's Annual Report

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The open meeting is traditionally the occasion on which the past year's activities are reviewed. But I think on this occasion, as we approach the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Commons, it is appropriate to begin by looking even further back.

It is a great tribute to our ancestors who recognised the importance of preserving open spaces in urban environments, which by the 19th century in particular were increasingly under threat of enclosure.

The Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866 allowed for the first time ever the preservation of open space under the management of public bodies. The act applied to the area within a 15 mile radius of Charring Cross and under this legislation a number of Commons were created including Mitcham Common, Clapham Common, Petersham Common and Barnes Common to name but a few.

But Wimbledon and Putney Commons were different. Perhaps it was because of the power and influence wielded by Sir Henry Peek, MP who led the movement to transfer the land from Earl Spencer to a body of Conservators, but Wimbledon Common together with Putney Heath and Putney Lower Common was as unique in its governance as in its physical character.

Not only were Wimbledon and Putney Commons established under a separate Act of Parliament in 1871, but the organisation was granted almost unprecedented independence with five directly elected Conservators and three cabinet level appointed Conservators, mandated to represent both local and public interests. Importantly, the Conservators were granted direct tax raising powers. In the words of Henry Peek, "Wimbledon and Putney Commons had no parallel in the United Kingdom".

In contrast, the various Commons that were founded under the Metropolitan Commons Act were typically constituted with larger governing bodies, appointed by local authorities or in some cases by the lords of the manor, and funded by government grants.

The Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act of 1871 vested the management of the Commons in a body of Conservators to preserve, protect and enhance the Commons and to keep it for ever open, unenclosed and unbuilt on for the purposes of recreation and exercise. It was, in the words of Henry Peek, "1,000 acres of the most beautiful common land in the whole of England, consisting of wood and water, and a magnificent open plateau to be maintained for general enjoyment."

I should add that in that same year, Henry Peek was also involved in establishing Wandsworth Common under similar governance arrangements. Unfortunately, however, by the time the Wandsworth Common Act of 1871 was enacted, the open space had already suffered from

both enclosure and the railway. Furthermore, its independence was to last a mere 16 years before it was subsumed into the colossus of the Metropolitan Board of Works and ultimately transferred to Wandsworth Council.

We are therefore very fortunate that the magnificence and independence of Wimbledon and Putney Commons have endured the test of time. And as Conservators, we recognise the enormous responsibility with which we have been entrusted to provide the stewardship for this unique resource.

Demonstrating our ability to provide that governance is therefore our first priority. In May 2018, Conservators met with the Charity Commission to provide early sight of various initiatives that were under consideration by the new board to further enhance operational effectiveness. A further meeting with the commission to provide an update on these initiatives, which relate to both governance and operations is scheduled for this September.

The commission has stated that it expects to publish the final report relating to the easement in Putney Lower Common in late October 2018. The report will also address the 2018 Conservator elections, in response to complaints raised with the commission. As a board, we have already agreed to codify rules for candidates as well as internal procedures, with a view to ultimately updating the election byelaws.

As a governing body, we have just completed a review of the strategy and business plan and agreed three emerging areas of focus that address immediate issues and help secure the long-term future of the Commons.

- 1. Long-term Investment** – We are fortunate to have a dedicated levy to finance the Commons, which provided roughly 70 percent of the unrestricted revenue of 1.7 million in 2018. Although this revenue is sufficient to meet the routine operating and maintenance costs, it does not allow for a sustainable level of investment in the assets.

As such, there is a growing and increasingly urgent need for substantial investment, particularly in the buildings that house our machinery and operational centres, as well as other infrastructure including footpaths, horse rides and cycle paths.

Although we are starting to consider possible amendments to the levy, the timescales involved in that process would be protracted. In the short to medium term therefore, various voluntary fundraising initiatives are under consideration, including a possible major campaign to coincide with the 150th anniversary in 2021.

- 2. Access** – The 1871 Act was clear; the Commons were intended to be used and one of the greatest features of the Commons has always been the harmonious way in which the diverse interests co-exist. And accommodating the competing and often conflicting demands that inevitably arise was likely to have been as challenging in the 19th century as it is today.

Although we no longer have to juggle the needs of the National Rifle Association with those of the local polo club, there is still a need to take a structured approach to considering the numerous requests from groups ranging from schools to running organisations. As such, we are in the process of constructing a decision framework that will hopefully allow us to systematically evaluate the demands on the Commons whilst ensuring that we meet our duties under both the 1871 Act and charity legislation.

In an age of ever growing demands for formal uses, it is important to remember that the Commons have also always been and remain important for their informal uses. As so eloquently put by its founder, "To pedestrians, it offers unequalled advantages and to all the very best of air with cheerful rural surroundings".

- 3. Land Management** – The unique nature of the Commons extends not only to its history and governance but to its ecology. To again quote Henry Peek, "there were flowers and insects which were scarcely to be found on any other common in England".

The Commons Strategy identifies the need to put in place a Land Management Plan for the fragile and varied habitats across the Common. This includes opportunities to increase the diversity and structure of our woodlands as well as develop and protect the rare and important heathland habitats for wildlife.

I should add that this area in particular depends on and thrives because of the involvement of volunteers. We are keen to further develop this area to provide a meaningful and enjoyable experience for all those who so generously give their time and expertise.

The strategy is ambitious and as Conservators it is our role to ensure that the individual initiatives are properly defined, well-resourced and delivered with excellence. We are therefore very fortunate in that its delivery rests with a strong team of capable and dedicated employees for whom the Commons are not only their workplace but their home.

The team is led by a diligent and insightful chief executive, who will speak further about the specific activities and achievements of the past year, but I would first like to ask Nigel Ware, Chairman of the Finance and Investment Committee, to present the financial statements.

Thank you very much.

Diane Neil Mills
Chairman
Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators