

WPCC General Open Meeting – 9 December 2019

Chairman's Report

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although the Chairman's report at the open meetings normally focuses on strategic matters, the key initiative in this area, amending the constitution, will be addressed later in the meeting as a separate agenda item. As such, I will focus my report this evening on more operational matters, which are normally addressed by the chief executive, but with his agreement, it does allow me to present a slightly different perspective. This will also allow the chief executive to dedicate his address this evening to the important work that he is leading under funding generously provided by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

To detail the full programme of events and undertakings that have been carried out since our last open meeting in June would consume the entire evening so I will focus on a few highlights, which curiously all took place within a reasonably short and admittedly hectic period during the month of September.

I will start with the Open Day, which was held in glorious sunshine on 8 September. True to the Open Day's origins, the event maintained its ethos of being a local event for local people. Meeting the horses and the Keepers in the Stable Yard remained as popular as ever, as did the now infamous Wacky Dog Show. Along with the many local charity and business stalls, visitors enjoyed craft demonstrations, riding and dog-handling displays. The Open Day's wonderfully informal and spontaneous character belies the thought, meticulous planning and care that officers put into organising the day. But the Swiss like efficiency in which the impressive programme of activities is delivered is a clear reflection of the team's experience and competence in managing large scale public events of this nature. In fact, this year we estimate that over 10,000 people attended the Open Day and we are enormously grateful to all of those who supported the occasion and for the very generous donations that were received at the end of the day.

Less than two weeks after the Open Day, on 20 September, we celebrated the launch of the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons, an initiative that brings together members of the community for the dual purposes of collective celebration and fund raising. The special evening celebrated the historic links between the Commons and the London Scottish Regiment through words, music, food, wine and Scottish single malt, commencing with a piper led walk from the windmill through the woods to a recital on the banks of Queensmere and finishing with a reception in this very room. The meteorological conditions could not have been more perfect: clear skies, moderate temperatures, auspicious moon phasing and star alignment and an easterly breeze of 7.5 miles per hour, the perfect conditions to allow the sails of the windmill to be unleashed. The iconic Grade II listed windmill effortlessly turning in the setting sun provided the perfect setting for the welcome reception for the evening and I would like to thank Asif Malik, Chairman of the Windmill Museum Trustees, for his support. Incidentally, under his leadership, the museum has gone from strength to strength, with visitor numbers exceeding 11,500 people so far this year and shop sales up a healthy 40 percent.

The Friends' programme is firmly on track; as of the end of October, membership totalled 211, two thirds of which represent households with more than one person so a total involvement of over 350 people. The Friends' Programme, under the leadership of my fellow Conservator Sarah-Jane Holden, is putting together the programme of events that will hopefully take us to the 150th anniversary of the date on which the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act received royal assent on 16 August 1871.

The last remaining droplets of candle wax from the banks of Queensmere had only just been cleared away when the weather made an abrupt turn for the worse. The deluge of 24 September proved to be one of the more challenging events of the autumn, causing significant damage to a number of paths and rides across the Commons and diverting the Maintenance Team from other planned works in order to undertake repairs to many of the paths, particularly those on the slopes down from the golf course.

Other works have been undertaken to improve accessibility along Lady's Mile. This major arterial path running through Putney Heath has been subject to extreme flooding. The maintenance team have reinstated the paths and created a new lagoon, creating a new and important small wetland habitat.

The final event that I will mention is the Wimbledon Guild Waggy Walk, which took place on 28 September. Whilst our role in this event was limited to providing the venue, I mention it because in many ways it demonstrates the important role that the Commons play not only in providing opportunities for physical and mental stimulation in a magnificent natural open space but in promoting social well being, evidenced by the fact that I understand that a not insignificant number of the more than 250 participants in the Waggy Walk do not even own dogs.

In the midst of all of this activity, we received not only a positive result from the National Lottery Heritage Fund but the award of 'Commons of the Year' for Wimbledon Common and two gold awards from the London in Bloom Competition. It is an astounding achievement and dare I say one that is truly well-deserved. It is an enormously positive endorsement and reflects the dedication, talent and commitment of every member of the team, led by Simon Lee, the chief executive, to achieve the highest standard of public open space. And it is our duty, as Conservators, is to provide the strategic oversight and support necessary to allow the organisation to continue to build upon its successes over the years ahead.

Thank you very much.