

# Wimbledon and Putney Commons

## Annual Conservation Report 2017/18

### Introduction

Forming part of a wider report on the activities that have taken place on the Commons from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018, the purpose of the Annual Conservation Report is to provide details about the main conservation activities that have taken place on the Commons over the past twelve months, to raise awareness about current issues and to inform the reader about any future actions that may affect the management of the Commons natural and semi-natural habitats.

In my capacity as Conservation and Engagement Officer for the Commons, this report will also include details about volunteering and the various public engagement activities that have taken place on the Commons over the past year.



*Volunteers scrub bashing on Putney Heath during August 2017*

## Heathland Management:

During the past 12 months, one of the most dramatic events to have occurred on the Commons' heathland involved a spate of uncontrolled fires that damaged two areas of ground. In total, the area that was damaged on these two sites measured just over 1 hectare and while WPCC staff attended each incident equipped with a water bowser and fire beaters, the severity of each fire required the attendance of the Fire Brigade.

Although we cannot be entirely sure how each fire was started, evidence suggests that the first fire which occurred near Memorial Ride was started by a group of school boys who were seen leaving the area and the second fire which occurred near Ladies Mile was almost certainly the result of a rough sleeper losing control of his camp fire. Despite saturating the two fire sites with water, both areas subsequently became re-ignited and once again while WPCC staff were the first to attend, the Fire Brigade was required to fully extinguish the blaze.



*Fire on the heathland near Ladies Mile*

Assisted by dry combustible grass (thatch) near Memorial Ride and mature gorse and dry bracken near Ladies Mile, the timings of the fires could not have been worse as in each case they coincided directly with the early stages of the bird nesting season (1<sup>st</sup> March to 31<sup>st</sup> July) and with the emergence of species such as the Common Lizard which has been recorded in both areas.

While the damage left behind by each fire was dramatic, the actual spread of the fires was largely contained by the network of paths that criss-cross the heathland and also by the additional fire breaks that continue to be maintained by the Commons' Maintenance Team.



*The immediate aftermath of the first fire near Memorial Ride*

In terms of the general management of the Commons' heathland, the beginning of 2018 saw the Commons' entering into a new phase of management under Natural England's (NE) newly established Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme. As a result of the Commons' dual designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), management of the Commons' heathland and areas of acid grassland fall under the Higher Tier element of the CS suite of agreements as this covers the management requirements for the country's most environmentally significant sites.

Providing a natural continuation from the Commons' previous involvement in the government's Higher Level Stewardship agreement, the aim of NE's, CS agreement is to provide a five-year plan of work that will help to deliver improvements to the character of the landscape, assist with educational access and provide habitat restoration and creation across the site.

According to NE's CS Negotiation Schedule, the aim of the management of Lowland Heath is '*to provide a mosaic of vegetation which allows all heathland features to flourish, including pioneer heath and bare ground which benefits rarer invertebrates, birds, reptiles and plants*'.

At an operational level, this work will include:

The control and management of birch, oak and scrub and other scrub species by cutting and stump treatment.

Rotational cutting (or grazing) to maintain a varied heathland vegetation structure.

The creation of bare ground sites through the scraping back of turves.

The maintenance of a full range of age classes of gorse by cutting and removing arisings.

The management of dense bracken stands and deep bracken litter layers by rotational cutting, bruising or spraying.

During the first year of the Commons' involvement with NE's, CS agreement, I am pleased to report that we have been involved with all of the operational requirements that have been listed above.

With the assistance of volunteers, the Commons' Maintenance Team and also staff from the Royal Wimbledon Golf Club, over the past year the main focus of our heathland activities has been on the conservation of heathland located to the east of Ladies Mile and on the regeneration of heather around the edge of the golf course on Wimbledon Common.

In the case of the work that has been carried out to the east of Ladies Mile, this can be seen very much in terms of a collaboration between the Commons' Saturday morning volunteer group (otherwise known as the Scrub Bashers) and the Commons' full time Maintenance Team. Equipped with basic hand tools which include bow saws and loppers, the Commons' Scrub Bashers which are now in their third year of helping on the Commons meet up on two Saturday morning's each month where their main task is to help cut back or remove invasive scrub and vegetation from the heathland and wider plateau.

Between April 2017 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018, there were 24 Saturday morning scrub bashing sessions held on the Commons with a total of 58 separate individuals taking part. While there is still a great deal to be achieved on the Commons' heathland, it is fair to say that without the ongoing assistance of the Scrub Bashers and other similar groups of volunteers on the Commons the likelihood of us being able to progress from our current SSSI status of '*Unfavourable recovering*' to a status of Favourable would be much reduced.

**Unfavourable recovering** – Often known simply as ‘recovering’.

Units/features are not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management mechanisms are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the unit/feature will reach favourable condition in time.

**Favourable** - The designated feature(s) within a unit are being adequately conserved and the results from monitoring demonstrate that the feature(s) in the unit are meeting all the mandatory site specific monitoring standards. A unit can only be considered favourable when all the component designated features are favourable.

*Information taken from the Natural England Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) glossary.*

In addition to all of the activities that have taken place on Putney Heath, another part of our recent heathland restoration work has involved steps to increase the coverage of heather on Wimbledon Common. Initiated by Natural England and involving a partnership between WPCC and RWGC, during the latter part of 2017, four areas of ground measuring approximately 1500m<sup>2</sup> were stripped of turf and re-seeded with heather brash. These areas are located close to the end of Camp Road, along the edge of Sunset Road and near White Cottage. Under supervision by members of the WPCC management team, all of the groundwork was carried out by staff and machinery from the RWGC at no financial cost to the Commons and all of the stripped turf was recycled for use around 12 bunkers (sand pits) on the Royal Wimbledon golf course. Forming part of the same designated SSSI site, improving the habitat value of both the Commons and the Royal Wimbledon Golf Course will prove extremely beneficial to the area as a whole.



*Heather regeneration on the Royal Wimbledon Golf Course (left) and one of the areas of scraped ground on Wimbledon Common (photographed during 2017)*

## Acid Grassland:

In addition to the Commons' heathland, another valuable habitat that is managed under the prescriptions of the NE CS agreement is acid grassland. Occurring on nutrient poor, free draining soils with a pH from 4 to 5.5, there are currently three areas on the Commons which undergo management specifically designed to help protect this increasingly rare habitat. These areas include The Plain, the area of grassland immediately south of Tibbet's Corner and a small area of grassland located near Centre Path, just south of Bluegate Gravel Pit.

While all three areas of acid grassland undergo an annual programme of works where contractors cut and remove vegetation from the site, it is the largest of the three areas, The Plain, which is subject to the most intensive programme of management. With an overall area of 11.7 hectares, between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> July, 9.7 hectares of this site is designated as a Skylark Protection Area where visitors are asked to keep dogs on lead, keep to mown paths and to not fly kites near the restricted area. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in attracting nesting Skylarks back to The Plain during 2017 but all of the necessary measures have been put in place again for a renewed attempt during the summer of 2018.



*Contractors at work on The Plain during August 2017*

### **Additional grassland restoration work:**

In addition to the management of the Commons' three recognised areas of acid grassland, during the beginning of 2018 a further piece of grassland restoration work was carried out close to the Southern Pound on Wimbledon Common. Considered too high in nutrients for inclusion in the current NE CS agreement, it was suggested by NE that this area of grassland could be restored to a better condition if vegetation was cut and collected on an annual/bi-annual basis and management was undertaken to reduce the coverage of scrub and undesirable species such as thistles and ragwort.

To initiate this work, the Commons' Maintenance Team have carried out the first phase of restoring this grassland site by reducing the tree coverage that is located around the edge of the area and it is anticipated that a programme of cutting and collecting vegetation on this site will be carried out during 2018.

Other grassland sites on the Commons that would benefit from a similar programme of 'cut and collect' are the small meadow site close to Cross Road Cottage and the area which surrounds the Oasis Academy on Putney Lower Common.



*Grassland near the Southern Pound on Wimbledon Common following tree removal at the beginning of 2018*

## Woodland:

At the beginning of 2017, the Commons' ten- year involvement with the Forestry Commission's (FC) English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) came to an end. During this period a great deal has been achieved and many of the primary aims of the EWGS which include maintaining the health and safety of visitors to the Commons, improving public access and helping to improve woodland bio-diversity have been fulfilled.

To help with the continued improvement of the Commons' woodland, we are currently in the process of entering the new FC Countryside Stewardship agreement. Similar to the previously mentioned NE CS agreement, the FC agreement will also see the Commons managed under the Higher Tier Element which has been designed to enhance the nation's most environmentally significant sites.

Covering a woodland area of 263 hectares, it is anticipated that the Commons' entry into the agreement will start at the beginning of 2019 and subsequently mark the beginning of the next ten years of woodland management on the Commons.

Forming a natural progression from the Commons' previous involvement in the FC's EWGS, the FC's CS agreement will involve the following objectives:

To create a more varied range of tree age to ensure good succession

To maintain and enhance hazel coppice

To reduce the dominance of holly in the understorey

To increase open areas within woodlands

To remove invasive non-native species

To retain non-intervention areas

To improve wetland areas and ponds

To encourage a wider range of native species

To maintain an appropriate and effective health and safety regime

To maintain and improve amenity

To obtain grants where available to further objectives.

To continue to encourage the use of the Commons for recreational and educational purposes.

While a great deal of time has been spent on the application process for entry into the FC's CS agreement, during 2017 & 2018, a variety of woodland based operations have continued to be carried out by Commons' staff and volunteers.

As described in the Commons' 2016 National Vegetation Classification (NVC) survey, the Commons' woodland is largely categorised as oak –bracken-bramble woodland – typical community (*W10a, Quercus robur-pteridium aquilinum-Rus fruticose.*)

As such, in many areas and especially where holly was thinned between 2014 and 2016 as part of the Commons' involvement with the FC's EWGS, bramble in particular has increasingly colonised many of these recently opened sites. While bramble undoubtedly provides benefits to wildlife in terms of cover, habitat and food, if left unchecked, it can undoubtedly have a more negative affect on the quality of the natural landscape.

Negative effects include inhibiting natural regeneration, limiting the development of ground flora and physically smothering other plants. For this reason, during the beginning of 2018, staff from the Commons' Maintenance Team were requested to mow bramble in specific areas of woodland in the south west corner of Wimbledon Common and this work will continue on a rotational basis over the next few years.



*Contractors photographed thinning holly in 2016. In many areas where holly thinning has been carried out, increased levels of light are now providing suitable conditions for bramble to flourish.*

To help improve the structural diversity of the Commons' woodland, during the latter part of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, other woodland operations included hazel coppicing in the area close to Lower Gravelly Ride and open glade management was carried out at the site of the former Brickfield Cottage which is located close to Robin Hood Ride.

In both cases, these woodland activities were carried out by the Commons' mid-week Volunteer Estate Team (VET's) which was initiated in December 2017 and meet up every three weeks on a Wednesday morning. Supervised by a member of the WPCC staff, the aim of this volunteer group is to carry out a wide range of activities which range from conservation tasks to litter picking and painting. Despite the relatively short period of time that this group has been in existence on the Commons, by the end of March 2018 there were 16 different individuals who had signed up to the group.

While the activities carried out by the Commons' Saturday morning Scrub Bashers inevitably requires follow up treatment by the Commons' Maintenance Team, so far, the tasks that have been allotted to the VET's have enabled them to remain largely self-contained.

For the hazel coppicing and the open glade management, dead hedges were created from the cut materials and other similar materials were also recycled for use by a local community garden and by two different groups of Morris Dancers.



*A group from the mid-week Volunteer Estate Team in the process of creating a dead hedge from cut materials at the Brickfield Cottage site*

## Oak Processionary Moth (OPM)

OPM is a non-native species that was first identified in the United Kingdom (Kew, West London) in 2006. Once established, OPM can cause the defoliation of oak trees and skin contact with the hairs found on caterpillars can lead to skin rashes and less commonly sore throats, breathing difficulties and irritation to the eyes. Having first been identified on Wimbledon and Putney Commons during 2011, OPM is now widespread across the site.

While the initial management of OPM on the Commons was carried out with assistance from the FC, since the end of 2014, WPCC has had the sole responsibility of managing this problem on the Commons. As a result, WPCC staff have developed an effective system of management that focuses on the two aspects of risk management and communications. In effect, this means that during the early stages of larval development, six areas of high footfall on the Commons are sprayed by a specialist contractor with a recognised biological control agent (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) and later in the summer, WPCC staff are involved with the surveying and removal of low nests from oak trees across the Commons.

In addition to this, OPM public notices are posted around the Commons during the summer months that advise visitors what to look out for and during 2017, 153 schools and local clubs were also contacted via email with information that, if followed, would help minimise the likelihood of their pupils and members coming into contact with OPM.



*Contractors spraying oak trees near the junction of Memorial Ride & Inner Windmill Road*

### **OPM life Cycle: (Information sourced from the Forestry Commission)**

**Egg Stage** – Eggs are laid from July to early September where each female lays between 100 and 200 eggs on twigs and small branches in the canopy. The first larvae hatch from the eggs in April.

**Larval stage** – OPM larvae can be found from April to June. There are six stages during the caterpillar feeding cycle with caterpillars getting progressively bigger during each stage. As they mature, thousands of short hairs cover the larvae and it is these short hairs that contain the irritant toxin.

**Stages 1-3:** Caterpillars are very small when they hatch, around 2mm long, and are still less than 1cm by the time they reach the third stage.

**Stages 4-6** – Caterpillars spin silken nests and the larvae eventually moult to the pupal stage within those nests. During this phase, larvae may also be seen massing on the trunks and branches of trees and moving in the characteristic processions that give the moth its Common name.

**Adult moths** – Adult moths fly at night from July until early September and they have a wingspan of around 30-32mm.

With an almost inexhaustible food source available to OPM on the Commons, the number of caterpillars, nests and infected trees is something that will almost certainly rise over the coming years and therefore the data from any survey that is carried out will only be accurate for that single year.

The most up to date information that we currently have on the spread of OPM on the Commons was however collected during 2017 & 2018 as part of a Forestry Commission and Cambridge University OPM monitoring programme. Forming part of a larger study into the relationship between the number of OPM caught in a pheromone trap and the amount of nests found around it (250 metres radius), between 20<sup>th</sup> November 2017 and 1<sup>st</sup> February 2018, a team of FC surveyors spent a total of 50 days surveying oak trees on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath. According to the FC co-ordinator for this project, this amounted to approximately 2000 hours of surveying. With the aim of using the data collected from this project to help inform future control measures, the FC team involved in this project surveyed six, 250 metres radius zones which surrounded pheromone traps on the Commons and every oak tree above the height of two metres was surveyed.

The areas where pheromone traps were positioned included:

- Westside Common
- The Windmill Car Park
- Putney Heath Road
- Portsmouth Road
- Horse Exercise area near Robin Hood Ride
- Caesar's Camp.

In total, the number of infested trees found on the Commons was 876 and the number of nests found was 1424.



*(Above) One of the six Forestry Commission maps showing the 250 metre radius around a pheromone trap where OPM monitoring was carried out on the Commons*

## Ponds, Rivers and Streams

Over the past twelve months, the management of the Commons' ponds and their surrounding areas has largely been involved with the completion of routine tasks.

As in previous years, the beginning of April marks the time when public notices are positioned around five of the Commons' ponds which ask visitors to keep their dogs out of the water from 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> August. This is done to help protect the Commons' breeding waterfowl and the ponds included are Bluegate Gravel Pit, Hookhamslade Pond, 7 Post Pond, Kingsmere and Queensmere. With such a large number of dogs regularly exercised on the Commons, policing these sites is difficult but Mounted Keepers do their very best to patrol these areas as often as time allows.

In addition to the positioning of public notices, another task that is carried out annually is the provision of fresh nesting material on the three floating platforms that are located on Queensmere. With the first of these rafts built back in 2006, over the years their presence on Queensmere has provided the area's waterfowl and especially Mute swans with some degree of protection but unfortunately, during 2017 they were unsuccessful in attracting breeding swans back to the site.



*One of the three floating platforms on Queensmere that is provided with nesting material each year.*

## Beverley Brook

Following correspondence with one of the Senior Project Officers (Toby Hull) from the South East Rivers Trust (SERT), during 2017 a number of meetings and site visits were made with Toby, WPCCC staff and members of the Wildlife and Conservation Forum to look at ways in which together, we may be able help restore certain sections of the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common.

In brief, the past modification works that have been carried out along the Wimbledon Common section of the Beverley Brook have resulted in a very un-natural, habitat poor watercourse which is currently failing in terms of its wildlife value and its potential as a visitor attraction. While we are still at the early stages of planning for this project, if we do choose to move forward with it, the proposed enhancements along this section of the brook would aim to:

- Enhance the visual amenity landscape character of the Commons
- Enhance habitat and species diversity
- Increase the opportunity for a more natural channel adjustment
- Improve public awareness of river environments and their variability.

With funding delivered over a number of years, the aim of the project would be to create a small number of demonstration pieces which would then hopefully lead on to a more extensive project of improvements. At the current time we are still in discussion with SERT but hopefully some level of restoration work along the Beverley Brook will begin in the not too distant future.



*WPCCC staff and volunteers on a site visit to Richmond Park to view some of the work that has been carried out by SERT along this section of the Beverley Brook*

## Putney Lower Common:

Perhaps the highlight of the year for Putney Lower Common was being presented with the Gold Award at the 2017 London In Bloom Awards.

### Gold Award

An exceptionally high standard demonstrated throughout. A consistent approach, which demonstrates both best practice and sustainable effort. Meets all of the judging criteria and objectives of London In Bloom and scores very highly in each section of the judges criteria. Outstanding – 170-200 points (85% - 100%)

Entering the competition for the very first time, Putney Lower Common was entered alongside Wimbledon Common, which was also awarded Gold during the 2017 competition, and marked on criteria which included areas such as access, staff/voluntary presence, control of anti-social behaviour, conservation and recreational facilities.

To help achieve the recognition which Putney Lower Common so richly deserved, management of the site is ongoing and over the past twelve months work has included:

- The removal of the invasive Ailanthus tree (commonly known as the Tree of Heaven) from two separate areas of the Common.
- Control of Japanese knotweed and Himalayan Balsam
- Aftercare of the trees that have been planted near the main field and near the Oasis Academy
- Regular mowing of the fields and the footpaths across the site
- Upgrading the maintenance compound
- Litter picking
- Enforcement of the Commons' Bye-laws.



*Putney Lower Common in Bloom 2017*

## Volunteers and Engagement

Over the past twelve months, volunteers have continued to play a huge role in helping to manage the Commons. In addition to the activities carried out by the Commons' Saturday morning Scrub Bashers and the mid-week Volunteer Estate Team, volunteers on the Commons have also helped with litter picking, assisted with events such as the Commons' Open Day, the Bioblitz and our Walking for Health events, formed membership of groups such as the Wildlife and Conservation Forum, collected wildlife data, assisted with conservation tasks and also provided other specialist help which has been of great assistance in specific area of managing the Commons.

Through the combined efforts of the 471 volunteers who have assisted on the Commons over the past year much has been achieved. Areas such as the Commons' heathland and woodland have become increasingly well managed, the problems associated with litter have been reduced and our knowledge of the Commons' flora and fauna continues to increase.



*Volunteers helping to clear scrub on Putney Heath during the beginning of 2018*

To help volunteers keep up to date with events on the Commons', quarterly editions of the Common Ground newsletter are also circulated to all volunteers and it is hoped that these provide an informative and hopefully interesting method of helping to further integrate volunteers into the wider life and activities of the Commons.

In addition to the Commons' written publications, during the past 12 months, walks and talks have continued to form one of the best ways in which visitors are provided with the opportunity to learn more about the Commons. Consisting of school visits, WPCCC management led walks, volunteer led nature walks and talks and visits to local societies and associations, between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018, the Commons educational programme of walks and talks included 39 events and attracted approximately 1550 people to attend.



*Keepers talking to visitors during the Commons' 2017 autumn management led walk*

As well as these events, we also have our fortnightly Walking for Health events which remain extremely popular and often attract participants from a considerable distance away from the Commons. Supported by the Ramblers Association and Macmillan Cancer Support, our programme of healthy walks which have now been running since June 2016, take approximately 1 hour to complete and they are led by a trained member of the WPCCC team and assisted by two of the Commons' regular volunteers.

While these walks are essentially provided to encourage people to lead a more active lifestyle, they have also proved to be another great way of keeping people informed about the many activities and occurrences which take place on the Commons. Looking back over the previous year, it's been great to see the popularity of these walks increase and while we generally attracted up to 15 walkers to each event during 2017, during the first half of 2018, we have consistently experienced numbers closer to 30 which is extremely rewarding.

To build upon the success of these events, a new edition to the Commons' programme of healthy walks has been the addition of our quarterly Walking for Health two hour walks which enable the group to visit a much larger area of the Commons than is usually possible. So far, these two hour events have been very well attended and it is anticipated that they will continue into the foreseeable future.



*Regular walkers photographed in November 2017 enjoying a well- earned hot drink after one of our fortnightly walks on the Common*

Peter Haldane: April 2018

