

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in Committee Room A on Thursday 12 December 2013 at 2.00pm

PRESENT: Chris Jones (Chairman)
Sarah Bird
Neill Buchanan
Mungo Chapman
Cllr Barbara Cobbold
Peter Freeman
Ian Marshall
Cllr Catherine Mayhew
Corin Thoday
Cllr Victor Webb

ATTENDING: Rodney Stone (Clerk)
Geoff Levitt (Treasurer)
Steve Budden (Warden)
Julia Woodgate (Support Officer)
John Barber (Friends of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Common)
Jennifer Blackburn (Rusthall Parish Council)
David Young (Sustrans)
Bartholomew Wren (TWBC)

MINUTES

1. CYCLEWAY

David Young from Sustrans outlined the importance of linking Cycle Route 18 (Ashford to Tunbridge Wells) with Route 21 to Groombridge. An essential part of this is the restricted byway from Cabbage Stalk Lane to Major Yorks Road, now called Spa Valley Way. The final part of the route, linking Major Yorks Road with Route 18 on the other side of town, is yet to be decided.

The restricted byway, although now part of the route, is not fit for purpose as it is unsurfaced, and Mr Young presented a proposal for surfacing with tarmac to a width of three metres. This width is standard for such paths in order to prolong their lives. There would also be signs erected.

Conservators expressed concern both over the width and the finish of the proposed path. It was pointed out that the area already attracts illegal motorbikes, and a path this wide would worsen the problem, as well as encouraging speeding and inconsiderate riding on the part of cyclists. Mr Young said that they find promoting responsible use encourages good behaviour and they have very little trouble on their cycle paths. They have volunteer rangers patrolling the route.

The Warden pointed out that the proposed width is within the current footprint, so it would not be an encroachment on the Common. He expressed concern that, if the path remained unsurfaced, it would quickly become unusable, and cyclists would start going off the path and onto the Common, causing considerable damage.

Mr Young agreed that the path width might be reduced to two and a half metres, but this was the minimum that could be considered, and chippings or coloured dust could be rolled into the surface to colour it or tone it down. He did not think that any anti-speed measures could be incorporated, or that giving priority to pedestrians would work, although he will erect "Share with Care" notices.

RESOLVED. David Young to produce a revised proposal for surfacing the path incorporating narrower width, better surface, and measures to control speeding; the Conservators to then hold a site meeting to consider it.

2. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2013 were considered, approved and signed by the Chairman as a true record.

3. **MATTERS ARISING**

a) Water Feature

Although, at their last meeting, the Conservators refused to give outline permission for a water feature in Brighton Lake, reserving their judgement for an actual proposal, a recent Town Forum meeting had given the impression that the Conservators had agreed in principle.

RESOLVED. Clerk to write to the Water in the Wells Group to clarify that no permission has been given.

b) Parking

A number of objections have been made to the proposed limited waiting time in Castle Road so the proposal will go back to the Joint Transportation Board in January. It is hoped they might agree to go ahead with the other parts of the proposal rather than starting the whole process again.

c) Kent Youth Services

The Warden confirmed that, although they sometimes have the van on the Commons roads, they have not asked for access to the Lower Cricket Pitch.

4. MEMBERSHIP

The under mentioned Conservators were appointed by the bodies specified to serve for the period indicated.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council:

Cllr Barbara Cobbold)	
Cllr Victor Webb)	one year term ending
Cllr Chris Woodward)	31 December 2014
Cllr James Scholes)	

Freehold Tenants:

Mungo Chapman)	
Peter Freeman)	2nd year of three year term until
Ian Marshall)	31 December 2015
Neil Buchanan)	

Manor of Rusthall:

Sarah Bird)	
Andrew Gower)	1st year of three year term until
Chris Jones)	31 December 2016
Nathan Dickinson)	

It was noted that Cllr Mayhew was standing down next year, to be replaced by Cllr Chris Woodward. The Conservators thanked Cllr Mayhew for her contribution.

5. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS 2014

RESOLVED – That the meetings of the Commons Conservators be held at 2.00pm on the following dates:

27 March 2014
10 July 2014
25 September 2014
11 December 2014

6. WARDEN'S REPORT

As the recent weather has been favourable, all the planned routine work has been finished. The storm caused comparatively little damage.

The path to the Marlpit Ponds has been completed, two ponds have been cleaned out, and work is just starting on a new path on Rusthall Common and the clearance on Tunbridge Wells Common.

The wildflower areas have just come to the end of the first year of the three year experiment. The plugs appear to have taken well, and it is hoped that they will flower next year. Both sides of the road have been scarified and yellow rattle seeds planted. This is parasitic and weakens grass, allowing the wildflowers to take a better hold.

He was asked why a magnificent holly tree overlooking the Lower Cricket Pitch had been taken down, and stated that it was part of the clearance, and necessary to open up the desired view. It was also dying back and impeded access through the barrier. Several Conservators requested that good trees should not be removed unless necessary.

He confirmed that the areas of Himalayan Balsam would be removed as it is a notifiable invasive weed, but, as it is attractive and a good nectar source, some may be left though controlled.

He confirmed that he has sown the agreed areas on the triangles at Vale Road with poppy seeds, and has sufficient left for an additional sowing in the spring.

7. FINANCIAL STATEMENT

The Treasurer submitted Financial Statement No 3 2013/14 showing total payments of £30,868.54 and receipts of £66,714.92.

RESOLVED – that the report be approved.

8. PROPOSED BUDGET AND PRECEPT 2014/15

The Treasurer told the meeting that the Government has asked for a council tax freeze again this year. The CPI was 2.2% and the RPI was 2.6%.

Next year's budget is based on requirements, and the Warden is satisfied that the Commons can be managed on the budget set.

A provision has been made for a 2% increase in salaries, and the litter and grass cutting budgets are contractual. There is a small increase in the tree budget for inflation, and a larger one for maintenance of cleared areas as these areas grow.

No assumptions have been made about funding from other sources, and the expected planning contribution from the Kent and Sussex Hospital redevelopment has not been included, although it is possible payment will be made in the forthcoming year. It was recommended that the Council should be reminded of the sum due to the Conservators.

The formula allows for an increase of 3.6%, but it is recommended that the Conservators continue to set the level at what they need rather than the maximum entitlement. This year it is 2%.

The view was expressed that the reserves should be kept at the minimum possible and the rest spent on the Common, rather than allowing them to creep up. The Treasurer was asked to assign donations to specific projects rather than putting them into the general budget as they may remain unspent.

RESOLVED – that the proposed budget for 2014/15 be approved.

RESOLVED – that a precept for 2014/15 of £133,170 be approved.

9. **FREEHOLD TENANT PROJECTS**

The Chairman of the Freehold Tenants outlined the projects they were proposing to sponsor next year, both to be completed before the end of the winter.

a) Remove saplings and scrub between Royal Victoria Grove and the racecourse, giving a rare chance to open up the view across the Common towards the High Street. It would enhance the grove by defining it more clearly, as currently its impact is lost by the secondary growth that has grown up to its edges. It would also create an open area between two heather sites to aid the spread of reptiles and invertebrates.

b) Create a new path from Marlpit Ponds to Common View, completing the circular path. This would require the installation of culverts to drain the water flowing down the steep banks, which will direct the flow towards the dried up pond, which is one of the few locally to support a colony of Great Crested Newts. To successfully complete this will require the installation of some sort of liner at a later date, but there may be outside funding available.

RESOLVED. To accept the Freehold Tenant projects with thanks.

10. **COMMON VISION UPDATE**

John Barber reported that the educational element is running, and the two schools involved are half way through the curriculum. Committees are working on interpretation panels and walks, and he hopes to have detailed proposals to present to the March meeting.

11. **RUSTHALL CRICKET CLUB STORAGE**

The Warden reported that the club need storage space for their equipment as the rules of their new league require it to be removed from the clubhouse. They wish to site a large container in the scrub, with only the front doors visible.

The Conservators expressed opposition to allowing a permanent facility, and argued that the container would be very visible. They did, however, think that, if sited beside the clubhouse, blocking one set of doors, and adequately clad to blend in with the surroundings, it might be acceptable.

RESOLVED. Warden to discuss ways of mitigating the impact with the club.

12. RUSTHALL WAR MEMORIAL

The Warden reported that work had begun to clean and restore the memorial. The restorers appeared to be doing a good job, and were being careful of the Common.

13. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

a) Wildflower Meadows

Cllr Mayhew read an email from a resident of Inner London Road reiterating their objections to the experiment. The Conservators stated that they had reached the end of the first year of the three year project, and would review it in the autumn of 2015. Cllr Mayhew suggested that the residents might be invited to this meeting.

b) Noise

An email had been circulated from a resident of Inner London Road drawing attention to the problem of noise for the residents from some of the activities on the Lower Cricket Pitch. The Open Spaces Policy normally ensures that noise is kept to within acceptable limits, but it was acknowledged that the Hospice in the Weald 10K Run event had become very loud and the addition of drumming this year was unacceptable.

RESOLVED. To write to Hospice in the Weald requesting that they remove drumming from their plans next year, and control their amplification.

14. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

4 Upper Street, Rusthall – erection of conservatory. Stated that no materials to be placed on Common and no damage to be done.

63 London Road – renovation of basement. Stated that no materials to be placed on Common and no damage to be done.

Not commented on:

Pantiles Service Station – retrospective erection of fence.
Merevale House – conversion of upper floors to residential
84 London Road – change of use, new extension
Satis, Mount Ephraim - extension

The next meeting will be held at **2.00 p.m. on 27 March 2014.**