

## TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

### Minutes of a meeting held in Committee Room A on Thursday 1 December 2016 at 1.00pm

- PRESENT: Ewen Cameron (Chairman)  
Mungo Chapman  
Cllr Barbara Cobbold  
George Craig  
Cllr Thelma Huggett  
Stephen Lacey  
Ian Marshall  
Cllr James Scholes  
Clare Sinha  
Corin Thoday  
Cllr Chris Woodward
- APOLOGIES: Paul Burnett
- 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)
- OBSERVING: Clive Evans  
Cllr Joy Podbury  
Alastair Tod

## MINUTES

### **1. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2016 were considered, approved and signed by the Chairman.

### **2. MATTERS ARISING**

#### a) Britain in Bloom Competition

The Warden reported that Tunbridge Wells Common was awarded the silver medal in the 2016 Britain in Bloom – Commons and Open Spaces category. He added that there were only two entrants. He has subsequently considered the criteria and recommends that Tunbridge Wells Common is not entered again.

#### b) Linden Park Cricket Club

Cllr Scholes confirmed that the club has not been in touch with him about a possible grant for the notices to dog walkers. His discretionary grant fund is now nearly spent. The office to remind them.

c) Pedestrian crossings

John Barber advised the meeting that Targetfollow have helped to resolve the last issues over the pedestrian refuge to enable the crossing on Langton Road to go ahead as planned. He has also received great support from the JTB over the proposed Major Yorks Road crossing, and he has been informed that KCC are to put it forward again for funding for 2017/18. They are also planning to begin design work in readiness for implementation in 2017/18.

d) McMillan Williams

The Warden confirmed that they have not yet started work to rebuild the bank, but have confirmed their intention to do so as soon as possible. It was noted that they have been trying to avoid parked cars encroaching on the footpath.

e) Risk Review

The Officers have completed their draft of the Risk Review for consideration by the Committee, who are meeting immediately after the full Conservators' meeting.

f) Licences for fitness classes

It was agreed that Targetfollow should hold a meeting with the Clerk to discuss the possibility further.

**3. MEMBERSHIP**

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

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Councillor Barbara Cobbold	)	
Councillor Thelma Huggett	)	one year term ending
Councillor James Scholes	)	31 December 2017
Councillor Chris Woodward	)	

Freehold Tenants

Mungo Chapman	)	
Stephen Lacey	)	2nd year of three year term until
Ian Marshall	)	31 December 2018
Clare Sinha	)	

Manor of Rusthall

Paul Burnett	)	
Ewen Cameron	)	1st year of three year term until
George Craig	)	31 December 2019
Corin Thoday	)	

#### 4. WARDEN'S REPORT

The Warden reported that it had not been possible to complete all the scheduled work in the last quarter, but it would be done shortly.

The area between Belleville and St Helena, which had been cleared to reveal an old bench, has proved a trouble spot for late night drinkers. The Warden has therefore removed the bench. Some trees, given to the Common by OVO Energy as part of their Conservation Volunteers Scheme, are to be planted there.

The main autumn clearance work has been completed, with assistance from a local mountaineering group who cleared the top of Bulls Hollow.

The main work of the winter, to scallop the racecourse edges, is about to start, and other tree work, including surgery to two large horse chestnuts at the bottom of Major Yorks Road, has been completed. He also intends shortly to start pushing back the scrub and small trees at the edges of Rusthall Road.

He has recently met a Kent Highways engineer to discuss the serious erosion in Mount Edgcumbe Road. KCC have agreed to repair the sides of the road if funding is available, and the engineer believes the best way to protect them from further erosion would be to face them with chestnut boards, secured by posts. He estimates that this will cost £5,000. To assist him with raising the funding he has asked for a contribution from the Conservators.

**RESOLVED. To offer a contribution of £500 towards the work.**

Further protection against unauthorised encroachment, especially from travellers, is being considered, especially in the vulnerable area of Mount Edgcumbe Rocks, where a tree trunk is to be dug in.

As all flat areas are vulnerable, but contractors need access, the Warden is considering using lockable metal posts at a lot of potential access points instead of wooden posts, which do not last long and are easy to cut. He believes they will cost in the region of £300 each. Some concern was expressed at the visual impact, but they will be painted Forest Green and only used where necessary.

*Cllr Woodward arrived at this point*

The Warden added that he was meeting the developers of the site beside Stranges Avenue to discuss the clearance work that they will fund.

#### 5. FINANCIAL STATEMENT NO 3

**RESOLVED – that the statement be approved.**

*Cllr Cobbold arrived at this point*

6. **BUDGET REPORT AND PRECEPT 2017/18**

Inflation is expected to rise to 2.5% - 3% in the forthcoming year. The litter clearing payment will rise by CPI and the grasscutting contract is fixed for 2017. However, all other costs are likely to rise during the year. Consequently, the Treasurer has eased up the budgets to allow for this. Salaries are the biggest expense and he has made a 1% provision for them. Salary increases will be determined in the March meeting, and any rise above 1% will need to be met from the contingency.

He no longer feels that the level of reserve that has been maintained for several years is sufficient to cope with major problems that might arise, and recommended that they should rise to £30-35,000.

The formula for agreeing the precept allows for a maximum of £150,975 next year, and the Treasurer recommended that the precept should be set at £150,000.

**RESOLVED. To agree the budget report and precept for 2017/18**

7. **ROADSIDE TREE SURVEY**

The Warden told the meeting that the cost of the annual tree inspection on a five year rolling programme would be £600+VAT per year. This price would be maintained for five years. The survey would be conducted by a qualified arborist and he believed it to be a very good price.

**RESOLVED. To agree a contract for a five year rolling programme of roadside tree inspections.**

8. **ROADSIDE DRAINAGE**

Kent Highways responded to the Clerk's letter, promising that the gullies would be cleared on 16 November. However, the Warden reported that they were still blocked.

**RESOLVED. To write to KCC again to ask for the work to be carried out as soon as possible.**

9. **TEMPORARY ENCROACHMENTS**

It was agreed that the Conservators were still to be consulted by email about each request after the Warden was satisfied about the arrangements. The Warden told the meeting that there had been two separate cases of companies digging up the Common without approaching the Conservators. In both cases, permission had been granted by KCC.

*Clare Sinha arrived at this point*

The view was expressed that the Conservators should be charging an administration fee, as in the past, in addition to any payment levied by the Manor.

It was agreed not to give formal power to the Clerk to take decisions in an emergency, but this will be held over to the next meeting.

**RESOLVED. To write to KCC to tell them that the Conservators have a statutory duty to protect the Common, and it is their responsibility to tell anyone applying for a licence.**

## **10. MANAGEMENT PLAN**

A draft report on the Management Plan was circulated electronically prior to the meeting, and hard copies were distributed.

The Freehold Tenants are hoping to have the final report ready by the end of February with the intention of showing it to the Council before the Conservators discuss it at their March meeting. If it is approved by the Conservators, formal consultation will begin with ecology and wildlife officers at the council and other qualified bodies for discussion of the detail.

The plan follows the same principles as the previous ten year Management Plans, but the emphasis has shifted from creation of clearances towards management of clearances for the benefit of wildlife.

**RESOLVED. To agree to the change of emphasis.**

In order to complete the plan, the warden needs to give careful consideration to his priorities, and assist with costings. The Conservators will follow the same funding model as currently, with project funded by outside bodies but ongoing costs being met from the maintenance budget.

The Warden believes the plan to be an excellent one, working as a natural extension to the previous plans. In cost terms, he believes that it will require a shift in budget provision from trees to cleared areas but will remain cost neutral.

The Conservators expressed their gratitude to the Freehold Tenants for their excellent work in creating the new plan.

## **11. FREEHOLD TENANT PROJECTS**

The Freehold Tenants have offered to fund the following projects in 2017:

- i) Thin holly near bat cave;
- ii) Plant field style hedge between the restricted by-way and the Pantiles Car Park to stop cars from creeping forwards;
- iii) Carry out drainage work to improve path from St Paul's Church to Happy Valley;
- iv) Remove scrub and improve the roadside edge in Castle Road above Romanoff Lodge;
- v) Install sleeper steps with non-slip surface to Fir Tree Pond;

- vi) Carry out selective clearances of scrub near Queen Anne Oak to increase biodiversity;
- vii) Scallop and scrape path from the Spa roundabout to the racecourse;
- viii) Widen new footpath on Rusthall Common near Tarry Path to the valley, remove scrub and put in new steps at desire line;
- ix) Remove rhododendron and other scrub and fallen trees at Cheesewring Rock;
- x) Extend surfaced path at Marlpit to join surfaced path at Common View.

The Friends of the Commons have also offered to fund the scraping of the rock ledges at the Cheesewring Rock and nearby.

**RESOLVED. To accept the generous offer of funding to complete all the projects, with thanks.**

## **12. RUSTHALL COMMUNITY ARTS**

They want to hold a one day event on Rusthall Common at a chosen oak tree, planning to decorate the tree with hand-made lightweight charms. The day will involve writing, wind charms, and possible performance, and will involve as many local people as possible. No problems arose from their last event.

**RESOLVED. To allow the event to take place, subject to them having obtained relevant insurance and agreeing to clean up afterwards.**

## **13. MEETING START TIMES**

The meetings have moved to a 1.00 p.m. start to facilitate Targetfollow's return to Norwich by road, but some members are having difficulty with this time. It was agreed that the days and dates should not be moved, and that continually changing the start time was leading to confusion. However, due to difficulties in March and June it was agreed to compromise on a 1.30 p.m. start, and review this at the June meeting.

## **14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

### a) Chairman of Friends of the Commons

John Barber told the meeting that he would be standing down as chairman of the Friends of the Commons so this would be his last meeting. He introduced his successor, Clive Evans.

The Conservators gave their thanks for his outstanding contribution over the years.

### b) Beacon on Rusthall Common

Rusthall Parish Council will be asking for permission to light a beacon to mark the centenary of the end of the First World War, but details have yet to be decided.

c) Pantiles Car Park

Cllr Woodward asked Targetfollow to explain why they had nominated the Pantiles car park as part of the site allocation procedure, as they had not raised the matter earlier in the meeting. Corin Thoday, for Targetfollow, said it was to open a dialogue on the future of the site.

Cllr Scholes outlined the history of the site as a fairground and as a temporary car park during the construction of Union House. He did not believe that its current use as a more permanent car park had ever been approved by the Conservators.

The Clerk confirmed this and added that the site had no planning permission as a car park. He also reminded members that when Targetfollow first owned the Commons they had informally sought the Conservators' reaction to enlarging the car park and had received a negative response.

Cllr Scholes stressed that all Conservators have a duty to protect the Commons under the County of Kent Act. He added that there was a history of strong public reaction to any attempt to reduce the Commons or limit access to them.

The Clerk confirmed these comments and added that he did not believe the Conservators' acquiescence to the present car park inhibited their duty or power over new proposals.

Ian Marshall stated that he did not believe the Statute of Limitations applied to Town and Village Greens.

d) Fire Brigade

As part of their emergency planning, the Fire Brigade hope use Brighton Lake as a water source to save the Pantiles if necessary. To test whether this is feasible, they have asked permission to run a test exercise. They will only pump a small amount of water and will ensure that no wildlife is harmed.

**RESOLVED. To allow the test to take place, subject to a written guarantee that no harm will be done to the lake or its wildlife, and to publicise the exercise so that people understand what is happening.**

15. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

Merevale House – redevelopment of old County Court into hotel. Requested that brick pavement be retained where new entrance crosses. Office asked to add concern about effect on parking while development takes place.

Amendments to Union Square redevelopment. Not yet responded to.

The next meeting will be held at **1.30 p.m. on Thursday 23 March 2017**