

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in Committee Room A on Thursday 25 October 2012 at 2.00pm

- PRESENT: Cllr Barbara Cobbold (Chairman)
Sarah Bird
Mungo Chapman
Nathan Dickinson
Peter Freeman
Andrew Gower
Chris Jones
Ian Marshall
Kate Sander
Cllr James Scholes
Cllr Victor Webb
- APOLOGIES: Cllr Catherine Mayhew
- 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)
- INVITED: David Scully, TWBC
Paul Austin
Saul Fajerman, KHWP
- OBSERVING: Maria Simmons

MINUTES

1. WILDFLOWER EXPERIMENT

David Scully, Landscape and Biodiversity Officer of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, presented his report on the wildflower experiment. The project was suggested by TWBC to increase local biodiversity following comments by the South East in Bloom judges in 2011; Tunbridge Wells won the Gold Award and Best In Kent in this year's Bloom competition, scoring highly on biodiversity. The areas chosen for the experiment are priority habitats for Lowland Meadows but not managed as such because of their location. Lowland Meadows are declining fast and the habitat is particularly important for a number of insect groups

The grass was left to grow on the London Road verges for the summer and cut down in September, and the experiment has yielded mixed results. Three experts examined the area before the grass was mown short in September. They found potential in all

sites, but improving floristic diversity in some of the areas would take many years and be very expensive. The area which showed the greatest promise was between Church Road and the bottom of the hill, where several very encouraging species, including harebells, were found.

He acknowledged that most of the residents overlooking these areas found the results untidy and the Conservators need support for the meadows to work. He pointed out that, although meadows can look unkempt in the early stages, they are usually found attractive once established.

A resident of Inner London Road, Paul Austin, was then invited to speak on behalf of many of his neighbours. He offered a petition, signed by 28 residents and comprising 93% of those polled, objecting to the experiment. He pointed out that they are not against biodiversity but believe the trial is being run in the wrong place. He offered the following reasons: they look uncared for and attract an increase in litter and dog mess; they stop people from using the area for picnics and recreation; they will cost far too much to maintain if they are ever to be successful; they force people to walk too close to the main road; the areas form a natural transition between town and common and therefore should be kept tidy; if only the area below Church Road is kept as meadow it will look odd.

The Warden summarised his findings and pointed out that an interesting meadow was not expected in the first year – this was an experiment to see what was growing there and determine how to proceed. Using the results presented by David Scully and his own observations, he believes that the triangles at Vale Road are too small to form meadows and the areas above Church Road have not produced interesting results as the soil has been too disturbed by services.

The top part of the area below Church Road has also been disturbed and produced only coarse growth, but further down the heathland is intact and results have been very encouraging.

He recommended that the experiment on this portion be continued, while discontinuing all other areas. At the same time he recommended starting a new experiment over the larger area opposite, above the coach park, where the soil is also thought to be intact.

Judging by the comments received from the general public, most of the immediate residents dislike it, but Tunbridge Wells residents generally are more supportive.

Following discussion it was agreed that, if the portion below Church Road was to continue as part of the experiment, it would have to be limited to a smaller area excluding the top part, the paths and mown edges would need to be wider, and the delineation between the meadow areas and the short areas would need to be sharper.

RESOLVED. To start a new experiment on the opposite side of the road next summer and start to improve the species in the reduced area below Church Road. All other areas to be discontinued. The experiment to run for three years in order to assess the results.

2. EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

Saul Fajerman, Education Officer of Kent High Weald Partnership, reported on the educational project feasibility study he ran this summer on behalf of the Conservators.

He looked at two main areas: schools, which would use the Common as an educational resource; and the general public.

He discovered that most primary schools within a two kilometre radius of either of the Commons would be interested in using the Commons to deliver parts of the National Curriculum if they had the following:

- a) Accurate mapping, especially of paths;
- b) Extensive information, especially about flora and fauna, and available online;
- c) Equipment such as sweep nets in the form of loanable or permanent kits;
- d) Infrastructure such as a pond dipping platform at the Marlpit Pond.

The members of the public who responded to the survey were very happy with the Common as it is, although they would welcome more interpretation boards and trails, as well as more printed and online information. He agreed that a maintenance programme would be built into any provision of structures such as information panels.

The next step would be to look for sources of funding. Awards for All would probably fund the provision of information for the public, but would not fund the development of schools packs. Cllr Scholes, who arranged the grant for the feasibility study, offered to help find this funding if KHWP can give accurate costs.

Jennifer Blackburn indicated that Rusthall Parish Council may be able to fund a kit for St Pauls School, depending on cost.

John Barber indicated the willingness of the Friends to work with KHWP subject to the approval of the Conservators.

RESOLVED. To support KHWP to apply for funding and develop the educational potential of the Commons. KHWP to supply accurate costings, if possible for the next meeting, but certainly for the March meeting.

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 July 2012 were considered, approved and signed by the Chairman as a true record.

4. **MATTERS ARISING**

a) **Mount Edgcumbe Hotel**

It was reported that they had moved their picnic tables onto the Common. The Warden was asked to ensure that this does not happen again and also to check that cables, which are apparently being fixed to trees, are not on the Common.

b) **Advertising boards**

The Warden confirmed that the board put up by Trinity had now been removed and Salomans had agreed to remove theirs.

c) **Beacon Hotel**

The Warden was asked to ensure that all the additional signs attached to the post are removed.

d) **Parking**

Cllr Scholes reported that he has a petition for a crossing over Major Yorks Road and he will ask for permission for this once funding has been agreed. The Clerk reported that TWBC were actively looking at the Conservators' suggestions for parking restrictions.

e) **Litter bins**

The Warden reported that three new bins had been delivered and were about to be installed.

5. **MINUTES OF COMMITTEE MEETING**

The minutes of the Committee meeting held at Harmony Street on 30 August 2012 were considered, approved and signed by the Chairman as a true record.

6. **HARMONY STREET**

The Warden outlined the findings of the Committee at Harmony Street, that preventing parked cars from putting their wheels onto the grass in front of Toad Rock would prevent parking entirely down that side of the road as there is currently only just enough room for a single large vehicle to pass. The Committee recommended that the Conservators allow a half metre strip of heavy duty grassguard mesh to be laid on the grass beside the pavement, with a line of bollards to prevent cars from going beyond the mesh. A further one metre strip of pedestrian grade mesh would be laid on the other side of the bollards to provide pedestrian access which is currently blocked by parked cars.

This would cost £4,105 + VAT, half of which will be met by Cllr Davies from his KCC allocation.

Some Conservators expressed serious reservations at allowing what was clearly an encroachment, although others felt it was the only way to protect the Common without adding to the parking crisis in the area.

Most Conservators felt that the additional funding should not come from the Conservators' reserves but from outside sources, and suggested that the residents who will benefit from the parking should be prepared to contribute. Targetfollow agreed to investigate the possibility of providing some funding.

RESOLVED. To allow the mesh to be laid provided all funding comes from outside sources. Work will not commence until all funding is secured. This is a unique situation and cannot be taken as a precedent

7. **MEETING DATES**

RESOLVED. To bring the final meeting of each year forward to December in order to agree the precept before the end of the year, as required by the County of Kent Act 1981. The final 2012 meeting to be held on 6 December at 2.00 p.m.

8. **WARDEN'S REPORT**

The Warden reported that all scheduled work had been completed despite the weather.

The work at Brighton Lake has been completed, and even more silt and weed has been removed than was expected. The Contractor has done a very good job, preserving almost all the fish, and a member of the public who fished in the lake as a boy and now runs a fish farm has offered to restock free of charge.

Unfortunately the constant rain during the work has resulted in a lot of damage to the surrounding grass. The ground has been levelled and the ruts smoothed out and as soon as it is dry enough it will be harrowed and reseeded.

The Warden thanked the Freehold Tenants for providing the funding for this work.

9. **ACCOUNTS AND FINANCIAL STATEMENT**

The Treasurer submitted Financial Statement No 2 2012/13 showing total payments of £32,483.83 and receipts of £1,804.30. He confirmed that Other Litter Collection covered the cost of removing rough sleeper camps and fly tipping, and that the projection for Collection of Litter was higher than the budget as the budget was set at the level being paid to the litter collector during his trial period.

RESOLVED. To approve the Financial Statement for the period ended 30 September 2012.

Chris Jones, Nathan Dickinson, Sarah Bird and Andrew Gower left at this point

10. **DISABLED PARKING BAY**

Maria Simmons was invited to speak. She asked for permission to erect a notice at the parking bay in Upper Street reserving it for disabled badge holders as she and another disabled resident find difficulty parking. This would not be an official bay.

RESOLVED. To allow the disabled residents to put up a sign and approach the council to mark it with lines on the road.

11. **MIDDLEFIELD COMMUNAL LAND**

Some of the residents of the new houses at Middlefield have approached the Conservators to enquire whether it would be possible to incorporate the communal land into the Common. The Clerk advised that it is not possible to add any land to the existing registration. If it was separately registered it would not be managed under the County of Kent Act.

It was agreed that no useful discussion can take place until there is more information.

12. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

a) **BT Emergency**

The Warden reported that he has been approached by BT who urgently need to renew their cables at the lower end of London Road and want to take them under the Common in front of the Forum rather than dig up the road. No further information is available.

b) **Gas main renewal in Rusthall**

The Warden reported that he has been unable to resolve the issue over repairing the damage to the Common caused by the gas replacement work. However, they need to reopen the work at Bretland Road, and the Warden has refused permission until agreement is reached over restitution.

c) **Craft Fayre**

RESOLVED. To refuse permission to hold a Craft Fayre on the Common next summer.

d) **Earthcache**

A club have requested permission for an Earthcache at Toad Rock. This consists of giving co-ordinates and information to members of the club who will visit the site and report back to other members online. No digging is involved.

RESOLVED. To allow an Earth Cache at Toad Rock.

e) Filming on Tunbridge Wells Common

The Warden reported that a company will be filming on the Common as part of an English Language teaching course.

Councillors Scholes and Webb left at this point.

13. MITIGATION STRATEGY

The officers, in conjunction with Kent Wildlife Trust, have prepared a mitigation Strategy paper to deal with the extra pressure that will be placed on the Commons by the large numbers of proposed new dwellings in Tunbridge Wells. They have prepared costings, including both one-off payments and ten year maintenance costs which, if covered by developers, would place a tariff of £72 per dwelling to be paid through the Section 106 Payment. This paper has already been presented to the Kent and Sussex Hospital site developers and been welcomed by David Scully of the Borough Council.

14. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

Ashton Lodge & The Lancers, London Road – rejoin the two houses. Pointed out that no damage must be done to Common during building.

Telecommunications cabinet at top of Major Yorks Road. Objected to fact that Conservators had not been consulted and stated that their permission was necessary.

Kent and Sussex Hospital – redevelopment plans. Made no comment on plans but reiterated expectation of financial settlement.

The next meeting will be held at **2.00 p.m. on 6 December 2012** in Committee Room A.