



COMMON GROUND

Registered Charity No. 1013975

WARDEN'S REPORT

February 2020



Volunteers with their new tree poppers about to tackle the Gorse

It has been another difficult Autumn and Winter so far, with seemingly constant wet weather causing us real problems with completing some of our work, particularly the cutting of our paths, tracks and minor clearings. We would normally expect to complete this in mid to late November but as I write this in mid January we still have quite a bit to do on Rusthall Common, including the major task of clearing the rocks and the steep escarpment at Happy Valley. Hopefully things will start to improve soon and the Flailbot and the other machines will be able to finish clearing the rest of the tracks and rocks.

As I mentioned in previous articles, our Ash trees were badly hit by Chalera, the Ash die-back disease last year and we have had to take steps to make some of them safe. We have had to put in a considerable amount of work along the Langton Rd, where we used a large cherry-picker to pollard a number of very large trees adjacent to the carriageway. The trees have been reduced enough to make them safe and we will now monitor them to see how the disease develops. This way, even if they do die they will provide some very useful habitat as they slowly degenerate. Carrying out this work has obviously put a severe dent in our budget for this year but the work had to be done, we clearly have to take public safety very seriously. On an optimistic note, amongst the badly affected trees, we have a few that look a lot healthier. This is an observation that has been

made across the country, so we have to hope we will have some resistant trees in the future from which to re-colonise affected woodlands.

Although we have been struggling with the path clearances, other work has been proceeding and it has actually been a very busy start to 2020. Our volunteers were out on the 4th of January, using our new tree-poppers to remove birch scrub and gorse from the heather regeneration site next to Castle Rd and then on the 6th and 7th, we carried out a major cull of cherry laurel on both Commons. This concentrated on the sections between Rusthall Rd and the Tarry Path and the area around the Fairground car park and the other side of Major York's Rd above the solicitors office. Several hundred trees were drilled and then injected with Glyphosate on each day and the effects of this will start to become apparent once active growth starts again in a month or two's time. Glyphosate is a translocating herbicide that will find its way into the root system of the plants and kill them completely and this system of applying it keeps it out of the rest of the environment, making its use as safe as possible. It is of course a shame to have to kill trees like this but as with holly, cherry laurel has taken over large areas, especially on Rusthall Common, forming a monoculture that has only limited value to wildlife.

The opening up of these areas to allow light in, will result in far greater floristic diversity in future, which will in turn permit the development of a far more diverse community of invertebrates, birds and mammals to colonise these areas.

On the day we carried out the cherry laurel treatment on Tunbridge Wells, we also started on the enlargement of Fir Tree Pond that has been financed by the Freehold Tenants; the original pond presumably covered the whole of the flat area at the bottom of the steps. Our original opening of the pond in the early 90's probably only restored it to about a quarter of its original size but it has proved itself to be a very useful habitat, being the earliest and most prolific frog spawning on the Commons, as well as supporting populations of both smooth and palmate newts along with good numbers of dragonflies and damselflies. With two excavators operating together, it took very little time to nearly triple the surface area of the pond and the spoil removed was mixed with logs and other woody debris and then landscaped to create a hibernaculum for reptiles and amphibians close to the pond at the edge of the woodland. With the removal of holly scrub that has taken place on the slopes above the pond in the last couple of years to allow greater early Spring sunshine to warm the water, I hope this lovely area will become an even more important wildlife site in the future. It looks a little raw at the moment of course but it will soon green up as the year progresses.

The following week, the same team moved over to the Marlpit site on Rusthall Common to start work on a jointly funded Freehold Tenant and Friends project; the restoration of a second pond there. Historically, there were always two ponds at this site but the second one dried up about twenty years ago and has not held water since. We cleared a lot of blackthorn scrub from the area last year to prepare for the pond restoration and the two machines again made very good progress on their first day. Unfortunately, Storm Brendan arrived that night and the rain was so intense that by the following morning we had a large lake rather than a small pond. As I write this, we are still waiting for the water to subside somewhat so that we can complete the task but I am confident we will be able to do this quite quickly. This is another great project and I am very grateful to have been given the funding to carry it out.

When the pond is completed, we will be moving over to Happy Valley to remove the final area of holly scrub that is still blocking the view across the horseshoe of the escarpment and then on to another Friends funded project, the reduction of the rest of the large hollies above Apsley St to allow more light down to the properties in Denny Bottom and make a stronger and

more manageable barrier against road noise. If I have any money left in my budget, I hope to be able to complete the remedial works identified in this Winter's roadside tree survey, as well as installing the new litter bins on Tunbridge Wells Common and creating a new, secure, access point into Happy Valley to allow our contractors in, whilst excluding all unauthorised vehicles. Once that is all done, it will be time to think about starting the grass cutting again!

It has been all change at the Conservators office in the last year. Our long serving Clerk, Rodney Stone retired last year and was replaced by Giles Membury, who many of you will have met by now at the Strawberry Tea or the Friends Lunch. Then at the end of the year, Julia Woodgate, our Support Officer also retired after thirteen years of organising the Conservators (and me) and keeping us all in order. The day we appointed Julia was one of the best days work we ever did and I enjoyed every one of the days we worked together, both professionally and personally. As you can imagine, the thought of replacing her was very worrying and not something I was looking forward to; however I think we have struck lucky again with the appointment of Gemma Stapely, who's bubbly, energetic and fun personality is very welcome and she seems to be fitting incredibly well into the sometimes arcane world of the Commons Conservators.

Steve Budden



Fir Tree Pond - Recently Cleared

NOTES FROM THE CHAIRMAN

FEBRUARY 2020 - WITH CLIVE EVANS

A very Happy New Year to all our members.

We plan to plant a new oak tree in memory of Patrick Shovelton, who was a founder of The Friends of The Commons. This is planned for 2nd February, and we are very fortunate to have his wife Helena attending.

Work has started on the Marlpit pond in Rusthall which is funded by The Freehold Tenants. Also in due course clearance work will be carried out in the Harmony Street area which was started last year which we funded.

The Parish Council are funding a new traffic survey on the Langton road, but we have no word when this will take place yet.

We have also been successful in acquiring funding for the very worthwhile Wild Child (Forest Schools) event which was very well attended last year (dates to be sorted).

Clive Evans



'Toad' by Toad Rock



Welcome to

THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

ANNUAL SUMMER TEA PARTY

at The Spa Hotel, Orangery

We look forward to seeing you and your guests

Wednesday 22nd July 2020
2pm - 5pm

The Spa Hotel
Tunbridge Wells, TN4 8XJ

Our AGM will take place if you care to join us later in the afternoon after the tea party. Full details will be in our next newsletter in early June.



Nigel & Grandson Volunteering

The Friends Officers & Committee Membership 2020

Officers:			Committee:	
Chairman:	Clive Evans	Tel: 01892 534040	Sally Balcon	Tel: 01892 515741
Treasurer:	Donald Clarke	Tel: 01892 615306	Dr Ian Beavis	Tel: 01892 523007
Mem. Secretary:	Chris Gurr	Tel: 01892 542408	David Wakefield	Tel: 01892 523983
Secretary:	Terry Coulthard	Tel: 01892 548785	Lynne Lane	Tel: 01892 533493
			Clive McAllister	Tel: 01892 532817
			Peter Miall	Tel: 01892 517599

RUSTHALL COMMON – ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

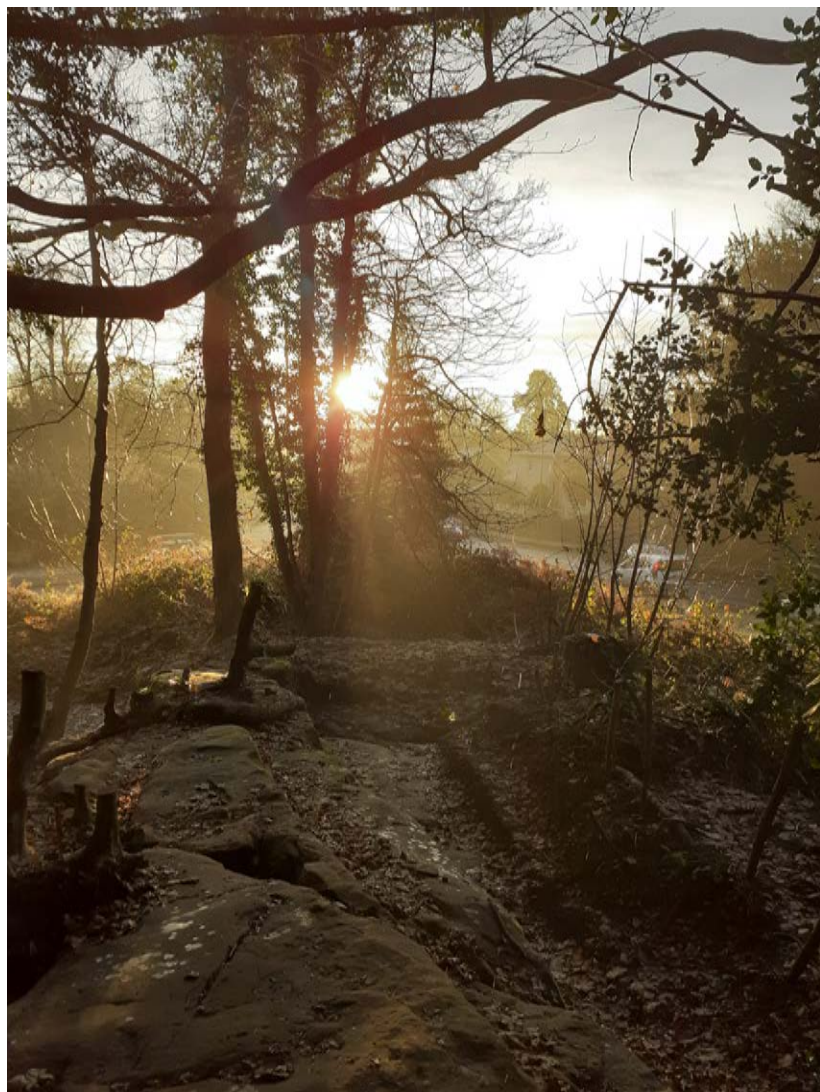
I'm sure many of you are aware of the research being undertaken at the eastern end of Rusthall Common. An archaeological evaluation has been running since 2018 and will continue throughout 2020. The site contains a mixture of stone cut features and structures, with evidence suggesting both an early medieval (Saxon) and prehistoric phase. This site is new to archaeology and continues to reveal a complex but intriguing insight to the ancient past of Rusthall.

We are actively seeking new volunteers for the 2020 season and plan to commence sometime in April (date to be confirmed). No experience necessary and families more than welcome.

For more information contact Nigel Stapple at
wkdarchaeology@gmail.com
or Chris Gurr via the Friends Of The Common.



Pippa & Nigel



Winter Solstice in alignment with the site

WILD CHILD 2020!

Connect to the Commons Forest Schools!

We are delighted to be hosting this incredibly successful and popular project this summer. Again, due to some very generous funding pledges we are able to provide Wild Child! completely free of charge.

SO, WHAT'S NEW THIS YEAR?

We have increased the number of sessions to 10! We will hold the sessions during the May and Summer school holidays. We shall be offering sessions for the whole family: tots to teenagers

And we shall do more to encourage disabled children and children with additional needs to come. The sessions are based on the Forest School model and are being run and managed by our friends at Kent High

Wield Partnership. We need volunteers to help set up and take down the equipment amongst other things, just get in touch Venue: Rusthall and Tunbridge Wells Common!!

THE DATES FOR 2020 ARE:

Tue 26th & Wed 27th May

Wed 12th, Wed 19th & Wed 26th August

More details soon, but tell your friends and family to put it in their diary

Contact: cajunbarn@outlook.com

Lynne Lane

Committee Member, Friends of TW & R Commons.



Leaf printing



Toasting Marshmallows



Whittling



Looking for lichen and insects



Photos from the Commons from 2019
Please email your photos or articles to chris.gurr@yahoo.co.uk



Bulls Hollow



Mole Hills near Brighton Lake



The Forum in Lego



Apsley Street BBQ



Ivy, Jane's Trainee Barista



Wounded Charlie



*Christmas Eve,
Dress up your dog*

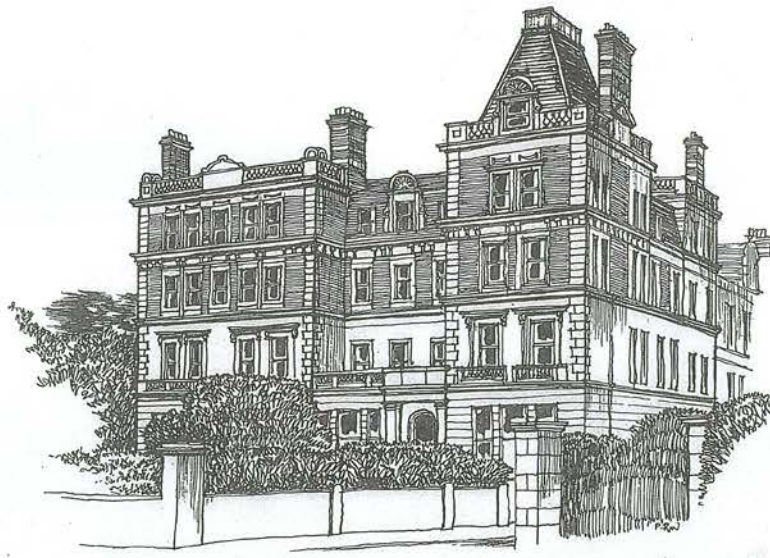
Victorian and Edwardian Hotels facing the Common

The English hotel boom started in London in the 1860s, with such grandiose examples as the Grosvenor at Victoria and the Langham in Portland Place. The movement then soon spread to seaside resorts such as Scarborough, and also inland such as Tunbridge Wells. Stylistically, these buildings not infrequently adopted some variant of an Anglicised French Second Empire mode, with a mansard or other form of frenchified roofscape.

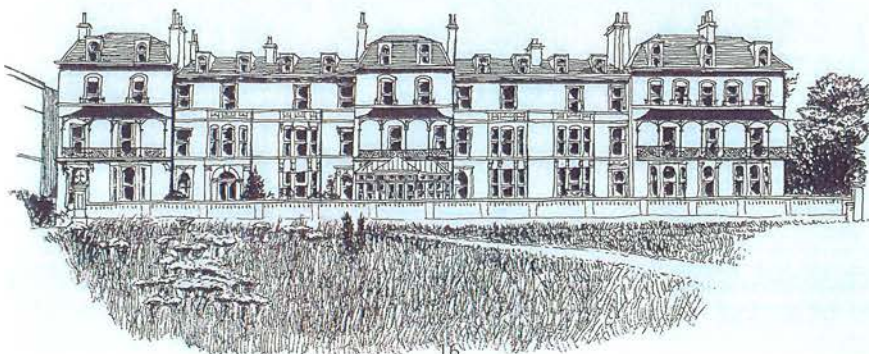
One of the grandest of these hotels in Tunbridge Wells was the former Earl's Court Hotel, 76 Mount Ephraim, later Reliance House and now known as Molyneux Place. This prominent structure started life as a two-storied mansion that was the residence of local worthy, the Hon F G Molyneux. Two extra storeys were added in 1904 by the local architect Henry Cronk, together with a crowning French roof in the form of a truncated pyramid. Thus the building stands like a great French chateau high up on Mount Ephraim ridge, 450 feet above sea level. The Earl's Court Hotel boasted of its luxurious furnishings and its central heating, and it was set in a four acre garden, with a nine-hole putting course. The Hotel use lasted until the 1950s, after which it became offices, eventually reverting to residential use, but as apartments.

Further along the ridge is the Travelodge Hotel at no. 84 Mount Ephraim. This too was originally envisaged for residential use, in the form of a mansion block designed by the local architect William Barnsley Hughes. However, the mansions were connected together, and the building was opened as the Wellington Hotel in 1875. Its design combines a mansard roof treatment with traditional Regency style balconies, and the building was remodelled internally in 1878 with the help of the eminent London architect Sir Robert Edis, designer of the Landmark Hotel at London's Marylebone Station. The Wellington's first manager was John Braby, who had been proprietor of the old Kentish Hotel. This was situated close to King Charles Church and was about to be redeveloped by Hughes on more ambitious lines. Braby was described in *The Courier* as having all the essential qualifications: "urbanity, courtesy, intelligent comprehension", and the "mature discrimination that the head of a hotel imperatively demands".

Philip Whitbourn
2020



The former Earl's Court Hotel, now Molyneux Place



The Travelodge Hotel,
formerly The Wellington Hotel



Green woodpecker feeding on yellow meadow ant mound.

ANT CITY



Yellow meadow ant

The ancient acid grassland in front of Wellington Rocks is covered with grassy mounds of various sizes. In low winter sun when the long summer grasses have died back, they show up especially clearly. Many users of the Common probably give no thought to them. They imagine they're just a feature of the landscape, maybe formed as tussocks by the grasses themselves. However, each of these mounds is home to a colony of Yellow Meadow Ants, creatures which spend almost all their time underground and rarely venture out on to the surface. Some of these mounds are very large and represent decades of work by many generations of ants. Some mounds in Surrey have been estimated to be as much as 200 years old.

As they are easily disturbed by human activity such as ploughing, Yellow Meadow Ant mounds are indicators of high quality natural grassland which has never been cultivated but only used for grazing.

Although the area near Wellington Rocks and Victoria Grove offers by far the largest display of nest mounds – a true ant city! – examples can be seen elsewhere in open parts of Tunbridge Wells Common, and also on Rusthall Common – for example by the Marl Pit ponds. Deserted mounds can sometimes be spotted under secondary woodland, indicating areas that were formerly more open. The mounds are used to regulate the temperature for the ants' brood, which is moved around inside according to external conditions, so they cannot operate effectively in too much shade. Ant nest mounds should not be confused with mole-hills, which consist of bare soil and are much more ephemeral. A good place to see mole-hills for comparison is along the roadside strip of grassland by Brighton Lake.

Yellow Meadow Ant workers – which are sterile females – forage underground through a network of tunnels to provide food for the young produced by the queen, who as in all social insects is the only one to lay eggs. The workers are the same size as the common Black Garden Ant of urban habitats but are easily distinguished by their clear yellow colour. They feed on small insects and other invertebrates, and they also nurture populations of aphids which suck sap from plant roots, 'milking' the aphids for their sugary secretion or honeydew. The aphids benefit from this arrangement as the ants protect them from predators. Other small creatures play a role as scavengers in the ant nest, including the blind white woodlouse *Platyarthrus* which is specially adapted for this lifestyle.

The only time when Yellow Meadow Ants appear on the surface is during their annual mating flight, which is less obvious than the 'flying ant days' characteristic of the related Black Garden Ant. Winged queens and males emerge from the nests, attended by numerous workers, and take flight to pair off. After mating, the males die and the females descend to the ground and shed their wings before burrowing down to start new colonies.

Ian Beavis



White Ants Woodlice



Yellow Meadow Ant Mounds



Winged Queen