



COMMON GROUND

Registered Charity No. 1013975

WARDEN'S REPORT

June 2019

Wild Child (Forest Schools) on Rusthall Common

It has been a busy time on the Commons, as we caught up on the work that was delayed by last years wet weather. The clearance of holly scrub at Fir Tree Pond was carried out and it was pleasing to see the extra light reaching the pond this Spring. The frogs returned in late February in good numbers, which resulted in a huge mass of spawn that hatched quickly in the unusually warm weather. We still have to seed the cleared area but there seems little point until we get some rain.

The under-canopy clearance machine then went over to Happy Valley to complete the removal of the remaining cherry laurel near St Paul's Church. This has radically changed the area, which is now much more open, with light now getting through to the ground, which will enable a far greater bio-diversity to develop.

The work also uncovered a number of fine old oaks, some of which have now been pollarded to make them safe and allow them to develop into veteran trees. We also had a trial visit from a remote controlled flail cutter that can work on steep slopes of up to sixty degrees.

This cleared the area either side of the 101 Steps and below the Sweeps Cave. It was a very successful experiment, which saved a great deal of hard hand clearance, as well as saving us a fair bit of money. Because of this, our contractors also had time to clear the mass of gorse that had covered the escarpment at the Beacon end of Happy Valley. This area was always an important site for our rare, solitary bees and wasps and I hope that this warm, south facing slope will again attract them now that we have re-exposed it.

The next phase of our roadside tree survey was carried out in December and we have now completed the works that were identified in it. This year it concentrated on Major York's Road, Hungershall Park and Fir Tree Road and around forty trees had remedial works undertaken. The value of this work has again been apparent, as we got through this years storms with almost no problems with our roadside trees. A few trees came down across paths in the interior of the Commons but these were quickly cleared.

With generous funding by the Friends, we drastically reduced a number of very large, overgrown hollies at Apsley Street, which has allowed a great deal more light down into the houses in Denny Bottom. Pleasingly, the residents there also formed their own volunteer group to clear the rocks and slopes and a lot of good work was carried out. This area is very difficult to maintain, requiring, as it does, labour intensive work with hand tools which I cannot really afford to do. Working in partnership with the locals however, enables me to carry out heavy works such as the holly clearance, which they can then maintain. I very much hope that the group continues in future years, it is a lovely area that really deserves this extra TLC.

Our volunteers were also busy over the Winter and in cooperation with the Kent High Weald Partnership volunteer group, they have done great works on our regenerating heather areas. This was again very much aided by the generosity of the Friends, who funded the purchase of four tree-poppers. These are simple but remarkably effective tools that extract birch and sycamore seedlings complete with their roots, without damaging the heather around them. This has been one of the major problems we have faced with our attempts to spread our heather areas across the Commons, so I am absolutely delighted with their success.

The Friends have also been leading the organisation of the hugely popular Wild Child events on both Commons this Spring. Many hundreds of youngsters and their parents attended and had a wonderful time building dens, getting delightfully muddy and toasting marshmallows. Many of the visitors were locals but a surprising number came from out of town. It was lovely to see them having such a great time and of course, the more people who grow up knowing and loving our Commons as we do, the safer the Commons will be in the future.

In the run up to Easter, we had another group of young people on the Commons. This time it was The Noise, a group from our local churches who carry out good works in a different part of the Town each year. This year it was the town centre and that of course includes

Tunbridge Wells Common. We had around twenty volunteers for three days and they carried out a big litter pick and also cut back the edges of a number of our surfaced paths. They all seemed to enjoy themselves and quite a few of them had not spent any time on the Common before. I am hoping that when they get to Rusthall in the next couple of years, I can get them to do the same there.

Bird nesting is now well underway and clearance work and cutting pauses until the end of August. We still have plenty to do, like renovating benches, putting in and repairing anti-parking posts and patching the car park surface, and of course the grass always needs cutting. This year we seem to be suffering from a lot of graffiti, so we have been kept busy repainting bins and benches. Even more irritatingly, quite a few of our trees were sprayed with some eye wateringly vivid colours and unpleasant messages, that were very awkward to remove without causing damage. But in spite of all that, it is still my favourite time of year, when I get the chance to stand back and watch everything come to life. The Common, like everywhere, is looking lovely at the moment, it has been a great year for violets and our Coralroot bittercress seems to be thriving. To judge from the number of spotty leaves appearing on our Common spotted orchid sites, we are in for another good display in a months time but the ground is desperately dry and of course with our sandy, free draining soil, the Common starts to feel the effect of drought very quickly. However, given the extreme weather variations we seem to experience these days, this situation could reverse quite rapidly, so let's just keep our fingers crossed and enjoy another lovely Spring.

Steve Budden



Clearance at Apsley Street, Upper Street, Rusthall

NOTES FROM THE CHAIRMAN

JUNE 2019 - WITH CLIVE EVANS

As the Bob Dylan song states, "The times they are a-changin'", that could be true of Tunbridge Wells politically at the present time.

So far this year the Friends have financed the clearance that took place around Harmony/Apsley and Upper Street in Rusthall (together with The Apsley Street volunteers and with our work parties around The Toad Rock area.)

Soon, with our help the new layby (which is at the top of Coach Road, Rusthall) which had been created by lazy motorists will be sealed off.

We will also be planting an oak tree in memory of Patrick Shovelton, one of the founding members of The Friends.

I must remind you all of our Annual Summer Tea Party at The Spa Hotel on Wednesday 31st July (booking details in this issue). With the aid of a kind donation by a mystery benefactor the price will be £10, the same as last year.

Also a free thank you buffet for all volunteers is to be held at The Forum (on TW Common) on Saturday 8th June 2019 at 12pm till 2pm. This event is kindly sponsored by Targetfollow.

Lastly, (they always say you should keep the best till last), The Wild Child (Forest Schools) event which has been taking place over the last few months has been a great success. The numbers of children and parents attending have been amazing. This was an initiative from our very own Lynne Lane, who arranged the funding and organisation. We thank Lynne and owe her an immense debt of gratitude for all her time and work.

Clive Evans



Welcome to

THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

SUMMER TEA PARTY

in the orangery at The Spa Hotel

Tea, coffee, juice, cakes and scones

We look forward to seeing you and your guests

Wednesday 31st July 2019

From 3pm to 5pm

The Spa Hotel

Tunbridge Wells, TN4 8XJ

The Orangery

Please find booking details included in this newsletter



The Wild Child (Forest Schools)

The Friends Officers & Committee Membership 2019

Officers:

Chairman:	Clive Evans	Tel: 01892 534040
Treasurer:	Donald Clarke	Tel: 01892 615306
Mem. Secretary:	Chris Gurr	Tel: 01892 542408
Secretary:	Terry Coulthard	Tel: 01892 548785

Committee:

Sally Balcon	Tel: 01892 515741
Dr Ian Beavis	Tel: 01892 523007
David Wakefield	Tel: 01892 523983
Lynne Lane	Tel: 01892 533493
Clive McAllister	Tel: 01892 532817
Peter Miall	Tel: 01892 517599

WILD CHILD!

Connect to the Commons Forest Schools!

I am delighted to report that our Friends of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons project was an amazing success in every way.

I hope you had a chance to come along to one of our sessions, with or without a child, to join in the fun or maybe just to watch. When I first thought of this project, I hoped that we would attract around 30 children to each session and I literally couldn't believe it when numbers of 80 on a wet day to 150 regularly pitched up to each session. It was an absolute joy to hear the children's excited voices getting louder and louder as they approached the activities laid on by the Kent High Weald Partnership forest school staff. The KHWP are experts in this field and know exactly how to

stimulate children's curiosity and learning about nature and the countryside. Feedback included "It's good here, no ones telling us what to do!" and "I can do it". For many families this was their first visit to the commons and we were able to direct them to the walking trails maps and common ground magazine. So, I plan to do something similar in the near future, I for one can't wait.

Special thanks to Saul Fajerman, Kent High Weald Partnership and his team of KHWP forest school practitioners and volunteers - plus thanks to the Ernest Cooktrust, Targetfollow and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council for their generous support.

Lynne Lane

Friends committee member



Leaf printing



Toasting Marshmallows



Whittling



Looking for lichen and insects

The Friends of Tunbridge Wells & Rusthall Commons Committee
Warmly invites you to join us for a

“Volunteers Thank You Lunch”

AT THE FORUM, TUNBRIDGE WELLS
ON SATURDAY, 8TH JUNE 2019, FROM 12 NOON TO 2PM

Please join us for your complimentary lunch to celebrate the good work
of all the volunteers/litter pickers



*The Forum, The Commons
Tunbridge Wells*

A huge thank you to Jason Dormon of the Forum for the gift of his wonderful venue.

We want this to be a nice informal event, dress code is informal and we'd love you to bring children - the next generation of volunteers.

We need to know if you are coming for catering purposes so please RSVP to Lynne Lane at: cajunbarn@outlook.com or telephone 01892 533493

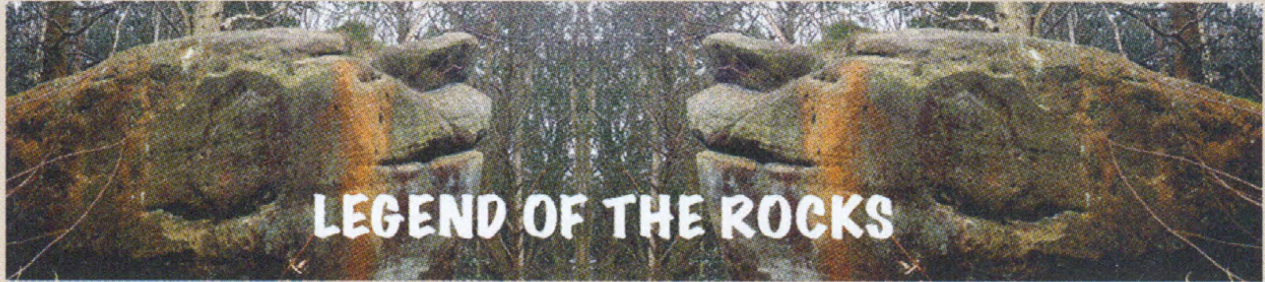


Kent
HIGH WEALD
protect / explore / enjoy

Targetfollow

LOCAL HAPPENINGS

Legends of the Rocks



Rusthall Community Arts is collaborating with Claque Theatre to produce a play called Legends of the Rocks as the centrepiece of this year's Arts Festival. Claque Artistic Director says the play will be the company's fiftieth community play and marks their fortieth anniversary. "I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate than to produce a play for my home community." The play is being devised through a series of workshops running throughout April and May. If local people want to be in the play casting is May 20th-23rd. Everyone who wants a part will get one. The production period is from the end of May through June and July. There will be regular rehearsals and opportunities to work with professional theatre designers making props, costumes, masks and giant puppets.

The Festival will have other offerings including Blues, workshops, dressing of the Toad, a homage to Picasso by local artists, and other galleries, concerts and film. The play will be performed around Toad Rock from July 17th to 21st 2019. Legends of the Rocks promises to be a highly visual piece of theatre and music. A group of local heroes get drawn into another dimension where they encounter dangers in the world of the Stone People in a quest to save the planet.

To find out more about Legends of the Rocks visit **www.communityplays.com**

If you have specific questions or want to take part or to help with design, making, stage management and much else email **rusthallcommunityarts@gmail.com** or to find out more about the festival visit the website **www.rusthallcommunityarts.org.uk**

Noteworthy Buildings Facing the Common

PHILIP WHITBOURN

Former Vale Royal Methodist Church

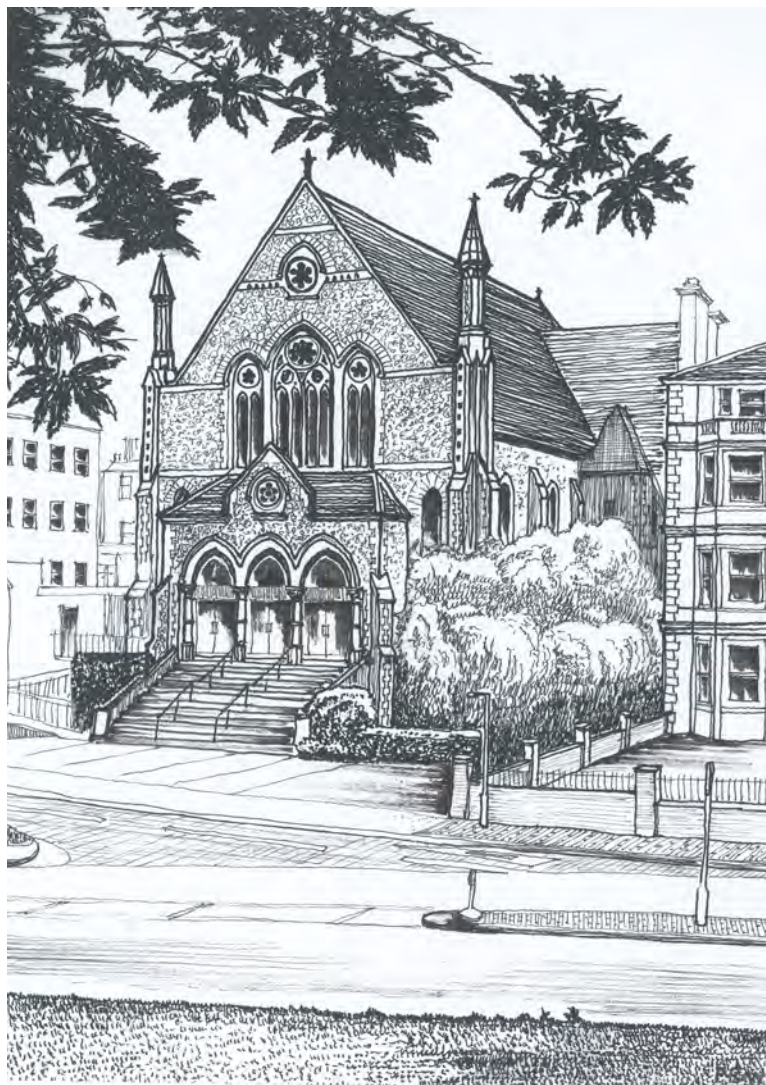
It was back in 2011 that I produced this sketch to illustrate a Newsletter article on the Vale Royal Methodist Church in London Road. At that time the future of this local landmark facing the Common was highly uncertain. A proposal to knock down the old church and to replace it with an unsympathetic tall angular modern block had been refused, and there had been talk of the possibility of converting the existing building for retail or residential use instead.

In the event, the place was put up for auction and a serious bidding war ensued, leading to its sale for £900,000, a sum that was well over the guide price. So some eight years after my original article and sketch, restoration and conversion work for re-use of the building as a gym appears to be approaching its latter stages, with the handsome mid-Victorian frontage to the Common still intact.

Dating from the 1870s, this Kentish rag-stone structure, in the gothic style, was designed by the architect Charles Bell, FRIBA (1846-1899), and built by the well know Tunbridge Wells builder William Willicombe. The current refurbishment project, and that newly completed at the nearby former Castle Hotel, which was a subject of a Civic Society Award recently, form a most welcome enhancement of the backdrop to our Common between Vale Road and Castle Street, and to this part of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Conservation Area.

Philip Whitbourn

March 2019



RECORD-BREAKING BEE-FLIES

Several years ago one of our volunteers at the Museum asked me to put a name to a fearsome creature that had menaced their family at a picnic. 'It had an enormous sting!' she said. It soon became clear that the family had sadly misjudged an inoffensive bee-fly on account of its long rigid proboscis.

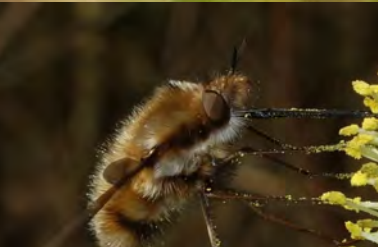
Bee-flies are a small group with only nine resident British species, some very rare, and two that occur on the Commons. As their name suggests, they are furry bee-mimics, and can easily be mistaken for a small all-brown bumblebee. They have many features in common with the much larger family of hoverflies, but in evolutionary terms they are a much older lineage that has come up with the same solution for avoiding attack by predators (especially birds) that hunt by sight. Young birds learn by experience to avoid stinging insects, and so many harmless insects have evolved to match one or other of the standard bee or wasp colour schemes. The rigid proboscis, used to probe flowers for nectar while hovering in front of them, is an unusual and distinctive feature; many insect groups have a long proboscis for the same purpose, but in most cases it is retractable, tucked up under the head when not in use.

The commonest species on the Commons – and by far the most frequently seen bee-fly generally – is the Common or Dark-edged Bee-fly which has a broad chocolate-brown leading edge to its wings. This feature is easily seen when the fly is settled but can be hard to spot when it is hovering with blurred wings. The other, much scarcer species on the Commons is the Dotted Bee-fly which has the wings unmarked except for a series of small dark spots.


Bee-flies are characteristic insects of sunny spring days, usually emerging in March, peaking in April and May, and fading out in June. Their larvae are parasites of solitary bees, so they favour the same sheltered flower-rich places where their hosts are to be found, or the sunny south-facing banks where mining bees often nest in large numbers. This year on 23rd February, which was a Saturday during that brief unusually warm spell, I saw a bee-fly flying around and settling on a gorse-bush behind Brighton Lake. Subsequently I discovered that this sighting had broken the current national record for the earliest bee-fly date.

Female bee-flies hover over potential solitary bee nest sites and randomly scatter numerous eggs in the hope that when they hatch the larvae will be able to find their way into a nearby nest burrow and attach themselves to one of the bee's larvae. The tiny eggs are sticky and weighted with sand so that they don't blow away and are also well camouflaged. Female bee-flies are equipped with a special sand-pouch which they refill periodically.

Ian Beavis



Common Bee-Fly Feeding



Common Bee-Fly



Dotted Bee-Fly