



# COMMON GROUND

Registered Charity No. 1013975

## WARDEN'S REPORT

February 2021

### CLEARANCE OF HOLLY AND LAUREL BEHIND FIR TREE CAR PARK

We might all still be locked down waiting for our vaccinations and wondering if we will ever get away on holiday again but at least the days are getting noticeably longer and to an optimist, there are hints of Spring in the air. Writing this at the start of February I am conscious that we could very well have frogs back in Fir Tree pond within a fortnight; all we need is a few consecutive damp nights with temperatures around ten Celsius or above. I know we will have some grim weather to come before Spring is fully with us but the arrival of our first frogs each year marks a real turning point.

Footfall on both Commons is still far higher than we would normally expect and given the amount of rain we have had, it is not surprising that our paths are currently in a dreadful state. Ironically, the fact that everyone is being sensible is making the situation much worse, as

people walk either side of the paths to maintain social distancing. Happily, our very free draining, sandy soil means that they will recover reasonably quickly, even if they will not look as good as usual for a while. I am just grateful that we have not suffered in the way many clay areas have. Of course, as I have written here many times, if wasn't for the poor, sandy soils, it would never have become a Common in the first place

The extra human presence is changing the Common in other ways too. It is not quite the quiet space that it used to be and I cannot but wonder what effect this may have on some of the other residents like the deer. They are still being spotted at the moment, so I am probably worrying too much. It certainly doesn't seem to have scared away the buzzards that are being seen on the Common more and more often, I have even spotted a red kite up there a couple of times in recent months.



I wrote last year about how our litter bins were being overwhelmed by the amounts of litter being left by visitors and this is still a problem but on the bright side, we are getting many more volunteer litter pickers, largely through the very successful Facebook group organised by Gemma. Gemma and I are trying to reorganise our litter clearance contract at the moment and we hope this will improve things but I worry about what will happen when the warm weather returns, if we are still in lockdown. Hopefully, all the extra use of the Commons will result in many new members for the Friends.

Our routine work has continued throughout the period, with the cutting of the tracks and paths, as well as the clearance of our meadows and long grass areas with the removal of the cuttings. Last year was the first time the track clearance was carried out by our new contractors and it was quite a learning process as they had to discover where everything is on the Commons, as well as how we want it cut. They did very well considering and hopefully next year will be considerably easier. There has been quite a bit of emergency tree work carried out and I dare say there will be quite a bit more before the end of the Winter storm season, but I am having to eke out our sorely stretched budget.

This means that I will not have much money left to carry out many of the improvements I would like, so I am as ever, very grateful for the extra funding that comes from the Friends and the Freehold Tenants. Last Autumn we completed the construction of the new ponds at the Marlpit site on Rusthall Common that has been jointly funded by both organisations. Weather problems meant that we ran out of time last Spring and had to cease work as we got too close to the breeding season for our Great Crested Newts. I am delighted that we have been able to finish the work and we now have a total of five ponds at the site. In the coming weeks we will be sowing a pond-edge seed mix across the site and hopefully they will quickly green up.

With funding from a successful Friend's grant application to the Sussex Lund organisation, we were also able to create a series of shallow scrapes and a wetland area at Bulls Hollow. The scrapes had to be lined with a heavy duty membrane to guarantee that they would hold water and the overflow area was lined with a pierced membrane to create an area of marshy habitat. Like the Marlspots, this site will be seeded as well in the coming weeks. I am confident that the new Marlspot ponds will attract amphibians to breed in them this year but it is going to be fascinating to see whether Bulls Hollow has a resident population who will find these potential new spawning sites.

The Freehold Tenants have again been very generous in funding projects. Last Autumn, several areas of grass on both Commons were scarified and seeded with a mix of native wild flowers that contained a fair amount of Yellow Rattle seed in it. This is an experiment to see how easy or otherwise it might be to increase the diversity of species within our grasslands.

A number of previous attempts to create wildflower meadows have failed because the grass out competes everything else. Yellow rattle acts as a parasite on the roots of grasses and weakens the grass to help the wild-

flower species to colonise an area. This technique worked well when we tried it on the grass between Inner London Rd and the A26 and I hope this will be the start of the successful creation of many more wildflower areas in the coming years.

In the last few weeks, we have carried out another quite radical clearance of holly, cherry laurel and sycamore scrub next to Fir Tree car park, again funded by the Freeholders. This has opened up the area between the Racecourse and the Bat Cave clearance and will allow much a greater diversity of plants and animals to flourish there than before when holly shaded almost everything else out.

In a few weeks time we will be carrying out another, similar clearance on the other side of Wellington Rocks, between the two paths that lead up from the top of Mt Edgcumbe Rd, one to the rocks and the other to the Victoria Grove.

We cleared the holly from the section closest to Edgcumbe Rd some years ago and this is now an open grassy sward that would be a good candidate for a potential wildflower site in the future. The new clearance will continue the removal of the holly up towards the grassland below Wellington Rocks, once again opening up the area for far greater diversity in future and also re-exposing some fine old oaks that are currently lost amongst all the scrub. It should also start to open up the view out across the Lower Cricket Pitch towards Trinity Church and the Opera House.

On a slightly more prosaic note, we also had the funding to create a ditch and bund around the car park at Fir Tree Rd, meaning that we will not have to keep replacing the posts around the car park, which were constantly being damaged by people reversing into them. At over £50 a time to replace them, this should save a fair bit of our budget over the coming years!

The final two projects for this Winter are the planting of a new hedge around the perimeter of the Fairground car park and the installation of a new flight of steps leading from the woodland near Common View down to the rear of the new Marlspot ponds. The slope there is currently almost unusable, it is horribly slippery and muddy. Unfortunately, we will not really be able to install the steps until things dry out somewhat, so I am afraid that it is probably not going to happen for some time yet.

*Steve Budden*



**CONTRACTORS AT WORK**

# NOTES FROM THE CHAIRMAN

FEBRUARY 2021 - WITH CLIVE EVANS

A belated Happy and Healthy New Year to all our members.

In these strange times I hope you are all safe and well. Hopefully the vaccination programmes will continue to be rolled out quickly and efficiently. The lockdowns have brought a massive increase in the number of people (and dogs) using The Commons for their daily exercise, and this has brought with it the perennial problem of litter being discarded, and not always in the bins provided.

On a happier note, groups of people and individuals (notably Mark Howden) have taken it upon themselves to regularly help clear areas of The Commons. The Friends have done their bit by buying and providing litter picking equipment for the use of individuals, groups and families. Our thanks must go out to Gemma Stapeley ([gemma.stapeley@twcommons.org](mailto:gemma.stapeley@twcommons.org)), who has been lending packs out along with our trail maps and membership forms!

Happy valley and other areas are benefitting with litter picking. We are also providing £3000 towards more clearance of Happy Valley.

Please also visit Bulls Hollow (when a bit drier), as the wetland project funded by a grant from Sussex Lund is nearing completion, all that is left to do is seeding the area, which will take place in the Spring.

Chris Gurr has recently arranged for a new print run of our popular trail maps to be printed. A supply of these have been made available at The Mount Edgcumbe Hotel, The Forum and Curly Vera's coffee van, which all provide takeaway drinks and snacks.

*Clive Evans*



**LITTER PICKING - TOAD ROCK**

## The Friends Officers & Committee Membership 2021

Officers:			Committee:	
Chairman:	Clive Evans	Tel: 01892 518975	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



# Curly Vera

There are worse locations to have as a work place than beside the car park at Fir Tree Road. I feel very fortunate to be able to spend my hours at such a beautiful and interesting spot; you'd be surprised at some of the things I see going on there.

One of the more common mishaps is people being so distracted by strapping children into buggies, overenthusiastic dogs barking and pulling, or the need to change footwear, that by the time everything is organised, bags packed, pockets checked, and the driver is ready to embark on the walk, they completely forget to close the boot or the driver's door! I have often kept an eye on a car parked with its door ajar, or reminded someone to close the back, if I happen to spot them before they leave the car park on foot.

The height barrier creates a few problems too; occasionally people forget that they have a top box or a bike rack fastened to the roof of the vehicle, and suddenly there's an ear-splitting CLANG or CRUNCH as the extra luggage thumps into the height barrier. One chap was most dismayed when his bike rack came a cropper; it was his son's bike, not a very expensive one from Halford's, that had been on the roof. The bike fell to the ground, miraculously undamaged. However, the far more costly bike rack was buckled and bent, and a write-off.

The obvious Summertime hazard of the car park is the speeding six- hit cricket ball. The cricket players cunningly fill the far-flung corners of the car park with their cars on Saturdays and Sundays during the season, leaving the general public to run the gauntlet of the lethal flying missiles. The coffee van has been hit once (so far), but gladly not badly injured. Some cars however have been bruised quite badly with dents, as has the ice cream van. I have even witnessed a shattered rear window, the cricket ball landing cosily on the back seat of the car.

Something that really makes me smile is seeing toddlers baptising their brand-new boots in the car park's puddles. As they are released from the captivity of the car seat, the little ones don't see the mud and the potential danger; they jump,

jump, jump, revelling the splash and soak, and the sparkle of the raindrops. Watching a child learning to ride a bike or launch a kite on the common also warms my heart to its core; one of those very special moments I feel privileged to share.

Dogs are an endless source of amusement; there are those who are SO excited to be coming to their favourite spot that you can hear the hysterical woofing, howling or yapping before the vehicle hits Major York's Road! Some dogs just come for their...well, shall we call it their morning constitutional. Once they've done the business, and the owner has dutifully cleared it up, these dogs will head straight back to the car, and look through baleful, stroppy, sulky eyes when they're told they now have to go for a walk. On the other hand, there are pooches who have such a brilliant time on the common chasing squirrels, running after balls, socialising with doggy chums, coaxing humans to part with treats, that when it's time to go, they refuse to return to the car. I've seen owners pleading, threatening, negotiating, bribing, even pretending to drive off and leave the dog behind! It can be a very lengthy game; about as much fun and as time consuming as Monopoly. I have also noticed that sometimes when the owner is trying to cajole their own dog back to the car, another one will jump in instead, with a keen, helpful "Will I do? I'm happy to cover!" look on its face.

I have seen intriguing encounters between parked cars; the secretive and suspicious, and the downright obvious. One early morning, a sports car drove into the car park, made its way to the furthest corner, and the driver (a young woman) sat and waited. After about 10 minutes, a second, larger expensive car arrived and drew up beside her. A man stepped out, which prompted the woman to leave her car too. The conversation started smoothly enough, but as it progressed, the crows flew from the trees, the dust rose in whirlwinds and the windows rattled in the toilet block! The language was rich and fruity, eventually culminating in the sports car screeching off down Fir Tree Road, followed by the guy in the bigger car, trying to look cool, as if nothing has happened. Lucky for them I am discreet. What goes on the Common, stays on the Common!







At the Van



Ivy

OTHER DRINK AND SNACK OUTLETS  
ARE AVAILABLE



Wellington Rocks



Jane and Ivy



Mount Edgcumbe Hotel



The Forum



# The Cottage

## *The Common*

Once known as Kentish Cottage, The Cottage is situated at the western edge of Tunbridge Wells Common, by the corner of Cabbage Stalk Lane, a narrow way that used to be part of the old route from The Pantiles, across the Common, to High Rocks.

The building appears to have started life in the 18th century as a simple rectangular block, and to have undergone considerable alterations and extensions in the 19th century. The substantial porch, with its rustic pillars and a bedroom above, dates from the middle of the 19th century, and the distinctive bell tower from the latter part of the century.

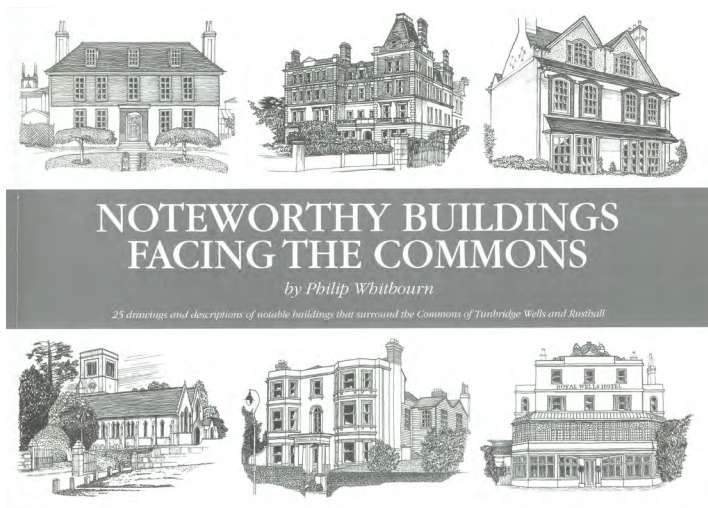
Best known of the occupants of The Cottage was the Revd. Dr John Cumming (1807-1881), the influential minister of the Scottish National Church in London's Covent Garden. Dr Cumming rented The Cottage in 1839 and subsequently took a lease on the property as a rural retreat.

Here he did much of his literary work, as well as cultivating the garden and keeping bees. His affection for the Common sprang partly from the way in which it reminded him of his native Scotland. In the 1840s he commented: "I never hear the thrush or the blackbird ..... without thinking of the Grampian Hills and Dee side". Then he went on to describe how, when walking out on a common on a still frosty night, the deep and overwhelming silence is almost audible. "From the measureless heights and depths of air", he observed, "there comes a rich undertone, half sound, half whisper, as if we could hear the crumbling and falling away of earth and all created things in nature's process of reproduction and decay; the very sounds as it were of the lapse and rushing of the sands in the great hourglass of time."

Members of the family continued in the house until the 1960s, Ethel and Lettice Cumming having bought the property from the Abergavenny Estate between the wars.

BY KIND PERMISSION FROM PHILIP WHITBOURN,  
FROM HIS BOOK, 'NOTEWORTHY BUILDINGS FACING THE COMMONS'.

Available From Waterstones (Tunbridge Wells)











SOWBREAD CYCLAMEN

# FIRST SIGNS OF SPRING



YELLOW CROCUS

Those readers who follow my popular Twitter account (6000 people can't be wrong!) will have seen my weekly posts for #wildflowerhour on a Sunday evening. On the last day of January, I shared a photo of one of the first spring flowers, the Early Crocus with pale purple flowers, distinguished from related species by the tube at the base of the flower being very long and thin. Crocuses are not native to Britain but have escaped into the wild in many places, aided by random plantings in semi-wild areas. Early Crocus was not recorded in the wild until the 1960s, but has since become the most commonly naturalised member of the group. Clumps of Early Crocus can be seen on the Commons in a number of spots, including near the Fairground on Tunbridge Wells Common and Bull's Hollow on Rusthall Common.

The appearance of Early Crocus is soon followed by two other common species, Yellow Crocus and Spring Crocus, the latter being purple but with shorter flower tubes than the Early species. These became naturalised in Britain in the mid-1800s and 1700s respectively. Apart from those that have been deliberately planted, individual plants can be spotted in random places on both Commons. There is also an Autumn Crocus which I have seen in the wild in Tunbridge Wells, although not on the Commons.

Snowdrop has traditionally been regarded as a native woodland flower in Britain, but current botanical opinion favours the view that it is a very old introduction. Snowdrops are not well-established on the Commons, although there was a group growing near Mount Edgcumbe some years ago, and other plants have appeared from time to time. A much larger plant with somewhat similar flowers is the confusingly named Summer Snowflake, which is in fact more of a spring flower. There are at least two conspicuous clumps of this plant on the Commons, one along the southern edge of Tunbridge Wells Common near York Cottage and one at the side of the Marlpit pond on Rusthall Common.

Cyclamen or Sowbread (so called because pigs were supposed to dig up and eat the underground parts of the plant) is another well-known wild flower which was commonly claimed as native but is more probably an ancient introduction. The autumn flowering *Cyclamen hederifolium* has pointed leaves which the Latin name suggests are somewhat like those of ivy. This species, which normally has pink flowers but can also be white, is well-established on Rusthall Common, including at Denny Bottom and near Rusthall Church, with the flowers appearing before the leaves. But there are related species that are spring-flowering, such as *Cyclamen coum* (Eastern Sowbread) with rounded leaves, which appear as early as Snowdrops and are worth looking out for too.

*Ian Beavis*



SNOWDROPS



SPRING CROCUS



SUMMER SNOWFLAKE