

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 30th January 2025 at 1.30pm

PRESENT:

Cllr Martin Brice
Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron (Incoming Chair)
Amii Errington
Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Cllr Jayne Sharratt
Clare Sinha
Cllr Pamela Wilkinson (Outgoing Chair)

APOLOGIES

Chris McHugh
Cllr Matthew Sankey
Corin Thoday

ATTENDING:

Daniel Colborne (Ranger)
David Miller (Treasurer)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
Clive Evans (Friends of the Commons)
Cllr Paul Gripper (Rusthall Parish Council)

OBSERVING

David Clover

PRESENTING

Adrian Berendt (Town Forum)
Joy Podbury (Friends of the Commons)
Warren Silk (West Kent Diggers)
Nigel Stapple (WKD Archaeology)

1. DECLARATION OF BUSINESS INTEREST

There were no business declarations.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Chris McHugh, Cllr Matthew Sankey and Corin Thoday.

3. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

In accordance with the third Schedule of the County of Kent Act 1981 it was noted that the Conservators are required at the first meeting held on or after 1 January each year to appoint a Chair for the ensuing year. Conservators agreed that Ewen Cameron, representative of the Manor of Rusthall, be appointed as Chair until the quarterly meeting of the Conservators in January 2026.

Ewen Cameron continued as Chair. The outgoing Chair, Cllr Pamela Wilkinson, was thanked for her service during the last six months.

4. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th October 2024 were considered and approved. A copy to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

5. MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The minutes of the Committee meetings held since the last quarterly Conservators' meeting on 5th November 2024, 9th December 2024 and 10th January 2025 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

6. MATTERS ARISING

Barrier for junction of Cabbage Stalk Lane and Tunbridge Wells Common

The Ranger confirmed that after due consideration there wasn't a suitable barrier that would deter motorbikes from entering the Common while also allowing horse and contractor access.

Electric car charging points for Fairground car park

Tesla had contacted Targetfollow to enquire about possible installation of trickle chargers in two car parking spaces on Fairground car park. Targetfollow need to investigate further and consider the feasibility of adding chargers to additional extra spaces. This would also tie in with the move of the payment meter.

Action: PBurnett to submit a full proposal to the Conservators for consideration.

Flood Forum meetings

PBurnett confirmed that Targetfollow's Jon Moore had been tasked with trying to restart the Flood Forum group meetings.

Action: PBurnett to update Conservators on progress at the next full meeting.

Public Enjoyment Plan

The Clerk had struggled to find the time to write the first draft of the Public Enjoyment Plan due to other work commitments. She had circulated a questionnaire to the community to find out more about how to improve visitor experience on the Commons and the responses would help inform the Plan. The Plan and staffing resource had been discussed during the annual review.

Action: The Clerk to continue working on the Public Enjoyment Plan.

101 Steps

A project proposal for work to the steps and drainage on the 101 Steps had been submitted to the Freehold Tenants for funding in 2025. The Freehold Tenants had approved the project, which would be taken in stages, as and when full project specifications and costings were available.

Reserves Policy

The Treasurer has reworked the existing reserves policy to reflect how reserves are now managed. The policy details will be added to the full Financial Regulations document which is currently being revised as a result of comments and guidance from the internal auditors.

7. KENT COUNTY COUNCIL (KCC)'S PLANNED DEVOLUTION

Adrian Berendt of the Town Forum and Joy Podbury of the Friends of the Commons joined the meeting to present a summary of the proposed plans for KCC's devolution.

Adrian explained that KCC and Medway had voted to ask for the County Elections to be postponed in May 2025 and for Kent & Medway to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme. If approved, he explained that the Borough elections scheduled for May 2026 may be cancelled and that implementation of the changes would take place as soon as May 2027.

It is proposed that there will be three or four Unitary Authorities to replace KCC and one Mayor for the whole County. As a default the four Conservator places currently allocated to elected Tunbridge Wells Borough Councillors, would be allocated to the Unitary Authority Councillors.

Adrian raised the fact that Tunbridge Wells is currently unparished and so there could be an option to allow residents to vote for a Town Council to be created. He stressed the importance of making sure that decisions were made well rather than quickly. Councillor Conservators added that there was a cross-party working group already focused on the process and implications.

Adrian and Joy were thanked for their contributions. Adrian left the meeting.

8. WEST KENT DIGGERS/WKD ARCHAEOLOGY REQUEST TO WORK ON SITE B

Background to the presentation, added to the minutes by the Clerk for context:

1. At the last meeting (October 2024), Conservators discussed a request from West Kent Diggers/WKD Archaeology, to start working on a new site adjacent to Dingley Dell. No decision was made because the Clerk informed all that the County Archaeologist did not support the request and raised significant concerns about WKD.
2. After the meeting, Cllr Martin Brice, the Clerk and Ranger met with Nigel Stapple and Chris Gurr (WK Diggers and WKD) to discuss a way forward to enable the request to be resubmitted, with the support of the County Archaeologist.
3. It was agreed by all in attendance that the Clerk would investigate KCC's concerns and that she would try to find a way forward to address all concerns raised.
4. The Clerk spent time communicating with KCC and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) Officers and got confirmation that a more detailed project brief was required.
5. The Clerk contacted Nigel Stapple to request the required information:

"I would like to ask you to prepare a detailed, evidence led brief which explains why the dig is required, detailing all of the background research such as surface finds, historic mapping, archive research, landscape features, test pit data and geophysical survey".

6. Following the request, Nigel objected to the demand. He sent several challenging emails to various parties, including his volunteers and stepped down as archaeological lead in Rusthall.
7. Nigel asked if he could join the next Conservators' meeting to discuss his request again.

During the 30th January meeting, Nigel Stapple presented a summary of his involvement in the archaeological research that has taken place on Rusthall Common since 2017, which included his experience, work with independent experts and papers written and submitted to professional bodies. He explained that West Kent Diggers was a popular community group that had provided educational outreach, work experience and a high level of local interest.

Nigel was unhappy with the recent involvement of TWBC's David Scully and KCC's Wendy Rogers, neither of whom he felt were suitably qualified to judge his work or place working restrictions on the group. He reminded Conservators that the Common was private land and that the decisions lay with the Commons Conservators, not Council Officers. He was not interested in appeasing bureaucrats.

After further discussion, it was agreed by all, including Nigel, that he would prepare a suitably detailed, evidence led brief for the consideration of the Conservators.

Following the meeting, Nigel notified the Clerk that he would not be seeking permission to carry out further excavations on Rusthall Common.

9. MEMBERSHIP

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

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – one-year term end 31 December 2025

Councillor Martin Brice
Councillor Matthew Sankey
Councillor Jayne Sharratt
Councillor Pamela Wilkinson

Freehold Tenants – 1st year of three-year term until 31 December 2025

Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Chris McHugh
Clare Sinha

Manor of Rusthall – 3rd year of three-year term until 31 December 2025

Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron
Amii Errington
Corin Thoday

10. RISK MANAGEMENT

Accidents

Since the last meeting in October 2024, there have been no reported accidents.

Incidents

In the last quarter:

- 31st October, fireworks being set off on Wellington Rocks.
- 25th November, two verbal assaults on visitors, by a homeless man, known to frequent the Common.
- 21st December, campfire on Wellington Rocks, with 6-12 people waving torchlit branches/sticks (Winter Solstice celebrations).
- Ongoing incidents of camps and littering in the “Pear Cider Den” behind Brighton Lake TWBC’s Community Safety Team and Kent Police involved.
- 20th January, extensive graffiti on Lower Cricket Pitch bin and inside the Wellington Rocks toilets.

Campers

- Two camps reported by IMarshall.

Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter:

- End of October, red leather chair left near Fairground Car Park.
- 5th November, sofa tipped on slope down from Gibraltar Cottage.
- 19th November, front seats of a van tipped by Coach Road layby.
- 19th November, three-piece suite tipped by Coach Road layby.
- 27th December, mattress dumped along Church Avenue to St Paul’s Church.

Complaints

There were no complaints in the last quarter.

Risk Register

Full review of the Risk Register completed by the Committee on Monday 23rd September.

Insurance claims

The insurance claim for the damage to the lamppost on Fairground car park was rejected by Zurich, TWCC were considered not liable.

The insurance policy was renewed on 1st January 2025, the public liability value and fidelity guarantee were increased, as recommended by the internal auditor.

11. CLERK'S REPORT

Summary of volunteer hours:

Volunteer sessions	Total number of hours contributed (since last meeting)	Financial value (as per National Lottery Heritage Fund rate of £10/hour)
Ranger volunteers	135	£1,350
Monthly Saturday mornings	40	£400

S106 – Requests and status

As an update this is the status of our requests:

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings /increase in dwellings	Amount requested	Latest update
18/03/2022	WA Turners (22/00238)	94	£18,800	18/12/2024 - application approved and S106 request approved.
11/07/2022	Showfields Estate (22/01576)	36	£3,377.75	Application approved.
05/09/2022	Cinema Site (22/02304)	166	£33,200	05/01/2023 application approved. Building in progress. 27/11/23 – notification of developer's intention to commence in January 2024.
15/05/24	Phillips and Eynsham House (23/01150)	44	£8,800	Awaiting decision

S106 Reserves

Brighton Lake ecological enhancement works:

Since the project was approved at the last meeting, £1,992 of the S106/contribution reserve for Eridge Road retirement flats has been spent on removal of a vast proportion of the invasive curly water weed and a large amount of bull rush from the pond. Contractor, Aquamaintain, used a Luxor weed boat to collect 4.6 Tonnes of green waste for composting.

A further £1,440 was then spent in December, when Aquamaintain returned to rehome a number of fish in the pond:

13 x Carp (Common Carp and Mirror Carp) up to 13lb
15 x Tench up to 2lb
18 x Pike up to 6lb
2 x goldfish/Carp hybrids around 2.5lb
5 x Rudd up to 8oz
23 x Perch up to 8oz

They purposely left several of the very small Perch, Rudd, Tench and Pike, as some of these will be food for fish eating birds and are not very appealing to the fishermen.

Several Ranger volunteering sessions have focused on the pond, to remove scrub and bramble, sensitively working to remove scrub and poor-quality saplings and trees on the two islands and removing fishing tackle and debris. The Ranger has removed the signs which indicate that fishing is allowed.

The immediate community living on Eridge Road, adjacent to the pond, have been kept fully informed and the wider community have been kept updated on the project via the website and social media.

Outstanding work as per the original proposal:

- Installation of 2 x floating reedbeds (2m x 1m) includes native aquatic wetland plants, installation, anchoring with anti-grazing measures. £850 + VAT + delivery. This will help mitigate against potential algal bloom following removal of existing invasive waterweed.
- New 'No fishing' signage (on the Island and by fishing spots), estimated at £300.
- Interpretation board detailing the historical context of the pond, and the ecological enhancement works. £500 estimate.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG):

It was agreed by Officers and the Committee that the offer made by Kier for the purchase of offsite BNG units on the Common, for the proposed Philips and Eynsham House development, was not financially viable or a good use of resource.

As a reminder from the Committee meeting minutes:

Offer: £37,720

Costs to take out of offer:

Ecological survey: up to £5,000

Legal title checks and drafting/reviewing, negotiating and registering a S.106 Agreement (or Conservation Covenant: £5-10,000

Plus, other costs to take out of offer:

1. Local Planning Authority (LPA)'s legal costs in relation to the S.106 Agreement
2. LPA's ongoing monitoring and enforcement fees (over 30 years)
3. Site Registration with Natural England
4. Costs of sale of the units (including sale contract)
5. Accountancy/tax advice (if required)

Public Enjoyment Plan

The Clerk's progress in producing the Public Enjoyment Plan had been much slower than anticipated due to the demands of the day-to-day work. However, a questionnaire, asking for the Community to comment on their time spent on the Commons and how the experience could be improved has now been distributed, with 102 responses received to date. The responses will be analysed and the data used to populate the Plan

Fundraising

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL)

The Clerk's application for funding from the FIPL fund to buy scything tools and equipment was successful and initial training with volunteers took place on Sunday 19th January. There is now a very short window to fulfil the commitments of the agreement before the final report needs submitting on 28th February. The Ranger and volunteers are committed to helping achieve the deadline.

Sussex Lund Project: Year 2

The work scheduled to take place on the Victorian Terraces, to open the route down to Brighton Lake and to enhance the view of St Mark's Church and railway line, has now been completed by contractor S Young. The work will and continues to be supplemented by the volunteers.

Planning/Planning applications and implications

The planning applications, including those listed in the agenda, have generated and continue to generate a great deal of work relating to the protection of the Common and prevention of encroachment. It appears that a number of Officers within the TWBC Planning Team need a refresh on the legal obligations of Village Green registration and encouragingly, the Clerk has been contacted by Carlos Hone, Head of Planning, to address this, together with the following proposed:

- Planning Team guided walks on the Commons, led by the Clerk.
- The development of information regarding the legislative framework for the Commons and how it relates to the town planning function as local planning authority, to be shared with newer officers and members of the department.
- Drafting of a planning 'informative' for decision notices that would direct applicants to the relevant legislative framework they also need to consider as part of any development decision making.

Kent County Council - Flood and Water Management

The Ranger and Clerk continue to work closely with the Flood and Water Management Team. At the last Conservators' meeting, approval was given for the installation of a culvert and pipe across Major York's Road and infiltration basin to the north of Fairground car park. Since then, Officers have been working with KCC Officers and their consultants, Waterman Infrastructure and Environment Ltd, to collate plans for the infiltration basin. The Ranger has been working to ensure that significant trees and their roots are protected, while allowing other poor-quality trees and scrub to be removed.

At the same time, plans are being developed for the nature-based solutions, which will come to the Conservators for approval when finalised. As a reminder, £5,000 of the Union House S106 funding has been set aside to contribute towards these works.

Fungi walk and talk

Fungi expert, Martin Allison has finished and submitted his fungi survey report for 2024. Martin reported that the Commons had a waxcap community of regional importance.

Other

1. Rusthall Bonfire and Fete Committee confirmed that they would not be holding the Bonfire and Fireworks on the Common View meadow in 2025. This change provides Officers with

the opportunity to consider the major habitat restoration project as proposed in the Ecological Management Plan.

2. The TWBC Facilities Management Team have requested that the rental agreement for Unit 1 is changed to Unit 3, as such Officers are organising to empty and clear Unit 1 and use Unit 3 instead. This actually gives greater opportunity for storage and for handyman tasks to be completed there, such as restoration of noticeboards.

Requests to Conservators

Since the last meeting there have been no requests to all Conservators.

12. ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT PLAN WORK SCHEDULE FOR Q4 2024/25

Work continues to progress well following the recommendations in the two Ecological Management Plans. Conservators approved the work schedule planned for quarter four 2024/5.

13. RANGER'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL WORK PLAN

Trees

The Ranger reported that during the last quarter there had been several consecutive storms, resulting in a challenging number of emergency tree issues to be managed.

Ash dieback

Safety mitigation plans and scheduled works to a large proportion of the ash trees affected by dieback were approved by the Committee in December 2024, with the contract being awarded to Gimbles. The work focused on the main road and path side trees with issues along the Langton Road, Coach Road and Rusthall Road. The contracted works were carried out without issue between the 13th and 17th January.

Given the highly prominent location of the works in Rusthall village, specific attention was given to ensuring that the community were informed and understood the reasons for the works before they were carried out. This included direct communications with Rusthall Parish Council, via social media and in Rusthall Life and Town Crier. While the work was unavoidable it does provide the opportunity for replacement tree planting over time to increase biodiversity, wildlife value and to enhance the aesthetics.

There remain ash trees affected by dieback which require mitigation works, for example at Still Green and Bishops Down, and a further plan for these is currently being prioritised and costed.

Elm Trees

Twelve disease resistant elm standards have been allocated to the Commons and will be strategically planted to ensure maximum aesthetic value and biodiversity benefits. The scheme is being deployed as per best practice ecological guidance to provide good habitat for the key species that were historically severely impacted by the loss of mature elms back in the 1970s.

High Value Trees (HVT)

The recommendations within the HVT survey continue to be followed, with some work having to be fast tracked due to storm damage. Recommended work on the three veteran oaks on the Union House exchange land (Mungo's) has now been completed. In theory, the cost of this work should be paid by the Estate of Union House, and the Clerk is pursuing this claim. There are now only two remaining trees that require work, the Queen Anne Oak and the large Chestnut by the footpath at the Lower Cricket Pitch, both on Tunbridge Wells Common. This is specialist work and quotes have been requested so that the works can be carried out within the next few weeks. The estimated cost is £1,500.

Drainage/Water Management

Work continues across both Commons to ensure that the ongoing programme of flood mitigation and drainage management is maintained and increasingly effective.

Additional flood mitigation drainage/ditching solutions are planned for the land adjacent to the footpaths on the London Road catchment area. This work should help to increasingly ease the pressure on the river Grom, particularly during heavy rain/flash flood events.

Grass Management

Short/Amenity Grass Areas

The new short grass contract has continued to work well and to a good standard. The warmer weather that is seen throughout most of the winter months is impacting the short grass, which does not appear to go into full dormancy. This is an issue as ever-growing grass on saturated soils is very difficult to maintain using mowers.

Long Grass Areas

During the last quarter there have been changes to the contractors working on long grass. At the end of October 2024, Honnington Farms suddenly stopped attending the Commons. This was disappointing and led to some areas not being cut as expected. However, from mid-January a trial commenced with a new contractor, Gardens of England. The new contractor has a greater array of equipment options and more operator availability, which will be very helpful going forward. So far, their work has been undertaken to an extremely high standard and first impressions are very positive. Gardens of England will be used to complete catch up work during the final quarter of the year.

Handyman

Unfortunately, the handyman that had been working on the Commons has decided to focus on other work and is no longer able to assist on the Commons. He had been a great addition, supplementing volunteer and Ranger work. The Ranger and Clerk will be taking time to find a replacement.

Fir Tree Road car park

The Ranger confirmed that further work was needed to be completed, to the entrance apron area of the car park, due to sustained damage by vehicles turning and manoeuvring. It was noted that installation of a sealed surface was not allowed on the village green. The Ranger is investigating alternative options and costings.

Financial work plan

Conservators approved the financial work plan for quarter four 2024/5.

14. FINANCE

Finance Report

The Treasurer presented the accounts for Q3 2024/5. Net income and expenditure for the nine months was £89,821, £48,977 above budget and £10,360 higher than for the same period last year (as restated to exclude planning agreement income, now shown in separate reserves).

As was the case last quarter, the bulk of the positive budget variance arises under the heading of Maintenance of Commons, with grass cutting affected by adverse weather conditions. Recent storms created an increased need for tree works, invoices for which are still coming in.

Income includes £8,000 for benches, now given their own heading under both income and expenditure. This consists of £3,000 previously included under other income, £2,000 received from Friends of TWCC and £3,000 transferred from a separate legacy reserve after it was allocated to the provision for four identified refurbished benches. Expenditure on parts and labour for new and refurbished benches is shown under Maintenance of Commons as incurred.

Adequacy of funds

As reported to the Conservators in October, adequacy of funds is now measured by comparing the accumulated General Reserve at the balance sheet date with a figure representing 30% of the full Precept for the year. The recommended minimum level is three months, i.e. 25%, as shown at the foot of the balance sheet, the General Reserve on 31 December of £175,641 exceeded the 30% of Precept figure by a comfortable £110,937.

Reserves

The balance sheet shows separate reserves relating to s106 planning contributions of £7,851 for Union House and £44,244 relating to Eridge Road, to be applied to relevant expenditure. Of the Union House balance, £5,000 has been informally 'ring fenced' for essential drainage works, leaving £2,851 for other expenditure.

Changes in accounting policies

Following input from the new internal auditors, it has been decided to cease accounting for depreciation on fixed assets. Depreciation has continued to be shown in these accounts but will be reversed out for this and previous years in the year end accounts.

For commercial entities it is standard practice to write off the cost of an asset to reserves as depreciation over its useful life to give a 'true and fair' view of the entity's financial position. However, for a smaller authority such as Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators (TWCC), it is normal practice to prepare accounts on a receipts and payments basis and to show fixed assets at cost. Indeed, the AGAR (Annual Governance and Accountability Return) cannot be made to balance without including depreciation as a reconciling item, leading to an audit qualification.

The accounts no longer show payments of insurance premiums and car tax as prepayments, to be amortised over four quarters, but are recording them as an expense when incurred. This treatment already applies to Precept income, recorded as received every six months instead of spread evenly over the year. The Treasurer will continue to accrue for invoices received and paid shortly after a quarter end as a way of maintaining comparability.

Potential reclaims

The internal auditors highlighted that local authorities and similar bodies can recover VAT on purchases by making a VAT126 claim. This does not depend on being registered for VAT and making chargeable supplies as would be the case for a commercial entity. A claim for just over £45,000 has been submitted, but it remains to be seen whether all or some of it will be allowed, depending on whether TWCC is a qualifying body and on the adequacy of some of the older supporting invoices.

Bank reconciliation

Conservators approved the bank reconciliation and statements as at 31st December 2024.

Action: Bank reconciliation and statements to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

Review and acceptance of interim internal audit 2024/5

The Interim internal audit report from Mulberry Local Authority Services Ltd was reviewed and accepted by Conservators.

The Treasurer had collated the report comments and recommendations, alongside discussion during the audit and provided a list of considerations for the Conservators which were discussed and actions agreed as follows:

Point/question	Response/Action
Should TWCC be using an accounting package?	Treasurer prefers the security and flexibility of using an accounting package, but our

	spreadsheet-based system works reasonably well and is cheaper. Action: Treasurer to make enquiries and report back.
Should we keep a register of declarations of interest?	Yes, and continue to ask for declarations at the beginning of each meeting. Action: Clerk to set up.
GDPR: should conservators have individual twcommons.org email addresses to help avoid data breaches and restrict access in the event of an investigation?	All were made aware of the possible risks, Council Conservators and Freehold Tenants were happy to continue with their TWBC emails and personal emails respectively. Manor of Rusthall Conservators requested a Targetfollow@twcommons.org address to be accessed by all four Conservators. Action: Clerk to set up.
Do we have a website accessibility statement? This basically provides for anyone with any disability (e.g. sight) to access anything on TWCC website?	Action: Clerk to ask website provider to resolve.
Are Conservator meeting papers published on the website?	Agenda has always been added, new sentence added saying that all supporting documents can be requested from the Clerk. Complete.
Are draft meeting minutes published on website as well as final versions?	Complete.
Either delete references to standing orders in the financial regulations, as we haven't any, or adopt some, as useful to have guidelines on voting etc.	Action: To be adopted.
Financial regulations last reviewed October 2023 with next review due Oct 2026 but already need updating re. reserves levels and presentation.	Agreed update as necessary following this interim audit
Table of authority levels is unduly prescriptive and outdated, meaning the tendency is not always to follow them exactly.	For lower value items need more freedom for officers. For higher value items we need contract regulations and if doing open tenders, need to publish information. Clerk and Treasurer to propose something more workable for consideration, referring to NALC guidance
Is VAT being recovered on purchases where possible? It is possible for Local Authorities and similar bodies to recover VAT using VAT126 claim form and can go back 3 years.	This appears to have been missed by past and present officers and Conservators, as well as past internal and external auditors. Treasurer has submitted a backdated claim. Complete.
TWCC's current Zurich insurance policy has public liability cover of £5m but recommendation for local authorities is £10m. Suggested fidelity cover level is year-end reserves balance + half of annual precept, so say £300k vs £50k currently in policy.	Complete.
Fixed assets are held at cost less depreciation in our accounts, which is standard for commercial entities, but local authorities always hold assets	The most straightforward and sensible course of action is to change our policies to show fixed assets at cost. The amounts involved are not

at cost. This caused a stir at the last year end because fixed assets were shown in the AGAR at cost as required but total reserves were shown after depreciation, as per our accounts, requiring the depreciation charge for the year to be included under 'All other payments' in the AGAR to make the figures balance, causing an audit qualification to be raised. AB was far more helpful in discussing and advising on this than previous auditors.	significant and it makes everything more straightforward. Treasurer to update financial regulations and amend December 2024 and subsequent accounts to show fixed assets at cost. Also need to restate March 2024 figures as required by AGAR
Bank reconciliations are now signed quarterly by Conservators, but recommended practice is to sign copy bank statements too.	Complete.
In our accounts and AGAR we should show mileage, payroll fees etc separately from salaries and staff costs such as pension contributions and employer's NIC.	Action: Treasurer to update accounts spreadsheet to analyse and report separately
Only need to show 5 previous years' accounts on website	Complete.
Need to ensure public right to query accounts is given full 30 consecutive working days, which must include first two weeks of July. Day of publication and of intention to publish not to be included in the 30 days.	Action: Clerk to ensure timetable followed
Next internal audit meeting set for Monday 9 June, at which figures, and compliance will need to be complete for passing to external auditors.	Action: Treasurer and Clerk to ensure all work is timetabled and completed in time, taking holidays into account.

Draft 2025/26 Budget

The Clerk presented the draft budget for 2025/6, as agreed by the Committee, Treasurer and Ranger. Conservators approved the draft budget.

15. UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

CEvans provided a list of possible Friends' funded projects for 2025, all would concentrate on direct public benefit:

1. Provision of a plaque for the Coronation of King Charles III commemorative tree. (The Ranger confirmed that he already had a plaque for the tree)
2. Noticeboard for Fir Tree car park area.
3. Information board for the historic racetrack
4. Forest school sessions, provided via Kent High Weald Partnership.
5. Fungi Walks x 2 and survey.
6. Developing a Tree Walk (someone to give knowledgeable guided walks required)

16. MARKETING AND PR REPORT

The report highlighted that there had been articles published in the Town Crier and Rusthall Life.

The Facebook group now has 2,717 members with monthly reactions from members between 1,336 and 3,147.

The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. Interest in the 101 Steps and cold bath.
2. Happy Valley cold bath, with images and historical discussions.
3. Deer spotted by Rocklea.
4. Project work at Brighton Lake.
5. Ash dieback work scheduled for Rusthall in January 2025

The Instagram account has 622 followers, while the website remains a popular source of information.

17. POLICY REVIEW

Conservators approved the amended and new versions of the following policies:

- Risk Management (no amendments)
- New safeguarding policy.

Action: The Clerk to add the new versions of all the policies to the website.

18. EXTERNALLY FUNDED PROJECTS FOR APPROVAL

The Clerk and Ranger had submitted several full project proposals to the Freehold Tenants' Committee for funding in 2025. The proposals were discussed at the Freehold Tenants' AGM and they had agreed to fund the following:

1. Cabbage Stalk Lane Pond – glade improvements.
2. Scalloping to edges of footpath down to Law 365.
3. Mount Edgcumbe Road – protection of cherry tree avenue.
4. Fir Tree Road glade restoration.
5. Phase one of works to repair the 101 Steps including drainage works and resetting the stones.
6. Happy Valley historic vistas.
7. Lion path vista restoration.

The Freehold Tenants were thanked for their very generous contributions.

Officers also highlighted that following the recent news, the Rusthall Bonfire and Fireworks event would not take place on Common View. There was now opportunity to consider a feasibility study into restoration and enhancement of the meadow.

Action: Officers to develop a plan for a Common View feasibility study.

19. ANNUAL REVIEW

The Committee and Officer team held an annual review meeting on 16th January, to look back over what has gone well and less well in 2024, how well the team had progressed against agreed priorities, and where focus needed to be in 2025, including any budget implications. It was agreed that progress was encouraging, despite numerous challenges, such as weather, anti-social behaviour, conflicting views on what should be allowed on the Commons, legislation and regulatory change etc.

The Committee recommended that the broad priorities remain unchanged in 2025, as follows:

- Ongoing focus on the Commons being for the community:
 - Stakeholder engagement, understanding and managing points of view.
 - Public consultation (survey underway, analyse responses and consider next steps).
 - Continue outreach efforts.

- Next steps with the Ecological Management Plan:
 - Continue EMP implementation.
 - S106-funded projects.
 - Draw on input from consultation and user counts to articulate Public Enjoyment plan.
 - Ensure we are in a good position to use all the valuable data we are collecting. Investigate Data Management System.
- Continue to enhance our way of working:
 - Continue to refine procurement process (new Financial Regulations)
 - Continue prioritising Ranger's time and trialling optimum mix of Ranger/handyman/contractor/volunteer resources.
 - Look for ways to release additional Clerk/General Manager time, consider admin/data/IT support options and bring a proposal to the Conservators.
- Continue to focus on having a happy and productive team.

20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

i. Holly trees planted on Rusthall Common at Dingley Dell.

The Clerk explained that the owners/occupiers of Dingley Dell on Langton Road had planted five standard holly trees on the Rusthall Common side of the boundary wall, without Conservator permission. Conservators agreed that the trees would need to be removed and instructed the Clerk to write to the owner/occupier to give notice for the work to be completed by the end of February 2025.

Action: The Clerk to write the aforementioned letter and send by recorded delivery.

ii. Bus stop on Major York's Road

CSinha asked the Ranger to lay a paving stone by the bus stop on Major York's Road.

Action: The Ranger to investigate whether the request is possible.

iii. Incidents on the Commons

JSharratt has received communication from one of her residents asking what action could be taken to make the Commons feel safer, following several incidents on Rusthall Common over the last few years. All agreed that CCTV would not be possible/effective over 256 acres and that a more realistic approach would be to continue to engage with the community, encouraging the reporting of all incidents, engaging with the local Police and making areas feel safer by clearing scrub and opening up unlit, darker areas.

21. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

05/00175/FULL | Retrospective: timber shed and garage. | 37 Upper Street Rusthall Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN4 8NX.

The Clerk had submitted an objection on behalf of the Conservators.

Application approved.

24/02798/FULL | Variation of Condition 9 of Planning Permission 24/00029/FULL - Updated drainage details | South Lodge Nevill Park Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN4 8NW.

The Clerk had submitted an objection on behalf of the Conservators.

Application approved.

24/02850/FULL | Replacement slimline windows and doors & barge board to northern gables, installation of timber shutters, fencing and vehicle gate | Gibraltar Cottage The Common Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN4 8BJ.

The Clerk had submitted an objection on behalf of the Conservators and the application was withdrawn, amended and resubmitted to accommodate concerns.

The Clerk explained that the applicant had asked whether a gate could be installed on Common land at the entrance to their driveway, given that the land is registered as Village Green then this was not allowed by Conservators.

MEETING ENDED: 15.07

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 24th April 2025, The Rackliff Centre, Rusthall.

Agreed Actions

Actions from 30th January 2025:

Agenda Item	Detail	Responsibility	Progress/update
4 & 5	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Chair	Complete
6	Submit a full proposal to the Conservators, for the installation of electric car chargers and payment meter move, for consideration.	PBurnett	
6	Update Conservators, on progress to restart Flood Forum, at the next full meeting.	PBurnett	
6	Continue working on the Public Enjoyment Plan	Clerk	Ongoing
14	Bank reconciliation and statements to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.	Chair and Clerk	Complete
14	Internal audit recommendations	Treasurer and Clerk	Ongoing
17	Add the new versions of all the policies to the website.	Clerk	Complete
18	Develop a plan for the Common View meadow feasibility study.	Clerk and Ranger	
20i	Letter to be written to Dingley Dell asking for removal of holly trees.	Clerk	Complete
20ii	Investigate installation of paving slab by Major York's bus stop.	Ranger	

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 24th April 2025 at 1.30pm

In advance of the meeting, Conservators had been invited to join a walk on Tunbridge Wells Common to highlight project work that had taken place during the Autumn and Winter season.

PRESENT:

Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron (Chair)
Amii Errington
Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Clare Sinha
Neil Spalding
Cllr Pamela Wilkinson

APOLOGIES

Cllr Martin Brice
Cllr Jayne Sharratt
Corin Thoday

ATTENDING:

Daniel Colborne (Ranger)
David Miller (Treasurer)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
Clive Evans (Friends of the Commons)
Cllr Paul Gripper (Rusthall Parish Council)
Joy Podbury (Friends of the Commons)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Neil Spalding was introduced to all as new Freehold Tenant Conservator, taking the seat of Chris McHugh who had recently stood down due to work commitments.

1. DECLARATION OF BUSINESS INTEREST

There were no business declarations.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Martin Brice, Cllr Jayne Sharratt and Corin Thoday.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 30th January 2025 were considered and approved. A copy to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

4. MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The minutes of the Committee meetings held on 14th February 2025, 14th March 2025 and 28th March 2025 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

5. MATTERS ARISING

Electric car charging points for Fairground car park

The Clerk had confirmed prior to the meeting that the payment meter had been moved. PBurnett reported that Tesla had decided not to proceed with installation of electric charging points in Fairground car park. A meeting was scheduled with Osprey to establish if they were interested.

Action: PBurnett to submit a full proposal to the Conservators for consideration.

Flood Forum meetings

PBurnett confirmed that there was limited interest from previous members to restart the Flood Forum group meetings.

Common View meadow feasibility study

The Ranger confirmed that the volunteers had worked hard to remove the contaminated soil from the bonfire site and that he had sown wild meadow grass seed over the area. He confirmed that he would be surveying the area for the rest of the year from an ecological and public use perspective to establish how to best manage the area going forward.

Action: Ranger to update Conservators on observations.

Paving slab at Major York's Road bus stop

The Ranger was unsure of the risk implications if he installed a paving slab on the Common and wanted to investigate further.

Action: Ranger to update Conservators.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT

Accidents

Since the last meeting in January 2024, there have been no reported accidents.

Incidents

In the last quarter:

- 25th March, damage to path verges by wide-wheeled motorbikes.
- 29th March, large hole in sandpit in front of Wellington Rocks, risk to children and dogs.
- 3rd April, campfire at The Bumps. Fire brigade called. No sign of a fire.
- 8th April, campfire reported. Ranger attended.
- People with chainsaws were stopped from removing habitat piles on the Commons on several occasions.

During the pre-meeting walk and following comments from members of the community, there was discussion about the health and safety risk of tree stumps as a trip hazard and the fire risk of having dead hedges and piles of brash from clearance projects. The Ranger agreed to revisit stumps and get them cut as low as possible. He was confident that dead hedges and piles of brash were standard practice and were of significant ecological value as bramble established and habitat is created for insects and other species. He did not feel that they were a significant fire hazard in the long term.

Action: Ranger to get tree stumps cut as low as possible to the ground on all projects moving forward.

Campers

- Many camps reported and cleared. Officers acknowledged that clearance has not been as prompt as it should be and will do better in future.

Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter:

- 30th January, 2 x waste oil containers on Church Avenue.
- 21st February, bedside table and stool near Apsley Street.
- 2nd March, large glass tank dumped near Hungershall Park.
- 7th March, tent dumped near Castle Road.
- 11th March, dumped rubbish on Tea Garden Lane.
- 19th March, tyre along Rusthall Road.
- 5th April, pile of breeze blocks along Tea Garden Lane.
- 5th April, parasol, metal rods and chair along Rusthall Road.

Complaints

There were no complaints in the last quarter.

Risk Register

Full review of the Risk Register completed by the Committee on Monday 23rd September, the annual review will now take place and be discussed and approved at the October full meeting.

PBurnett and AErrington asked whether a fence would be installed above the newly cleared Cabbage Stalk Lane Pond as they felt it was a risk. The previous fence was removed as part of the clearance but had been installed to prevent motorbike users from driving down the hill.

Action: Ranger to consider whether a new fence above Cabbage Stalk Lane Pond is required and feedback to Conservators.

7. CLERK'S REPORT

Summary of volunteer hours:

Volunteer sessions	Total number of hours contributed (since last meeting)	Total number of hours year to date since recording started in October 2024	Financial value year to date (as per National Lottery Heritage Fund rate of £10/hour)
Ranger volunteers	260	481	£4,810
Monthly Saturday mornings	70	200	£2,000

S106 – Requests and status

As an update this is the status of our requests:

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings /increase in dwellings	Amount requested	Latest update
18/03/2022	WA Turners (22/00238)	94	£18,800	18/12/2024 - application approved and S106 request approved.
11/07/2022	Showfields Estate (22/01576)	36	£3,377.75	Application approved.
05/09/2022	Cinema Site (22/02304)	166	£33,200	05/01/2023 application approved.

				Building in progress. 27/11/23 – notification of developer’s intention to commence in January 2024.
15/05/24	Phillips and Eynsham House (23/01150)	44	£8,800	Awaiting decision

S106 Reserves

Summary of funds and works completed

Union House (The Potteries:):

Total: £9,851

Works completed to date:

- Drainage works including restoration to Racecourse, £2,000
 - Reserve for KCC’s nature-based flood management works, £5,000
- Balance: £2,851

Eridge Road retirement flats: (note that during the meeting PBurnett observed that the Clerk’s list for Eridge Road did not tally with the Treasurer’s accounts, this has now been amended for the minutes).

S106 and Contribution to the Commons total: £50,687.68 Works completed to date:

- High value tree survey (Living Forest) £1,032
 - Fir Tree Road car park repairs (Keith Bedford) £990 deposit and £990 balance
 - Truxor weed boat and team for weed removal from Brighton Lake (Aquamaintain), £1,260
 - Weed removal for composting - Brighton Lake (Omni recycling), £732
 - Fish management in Brighton Lake (Aquamaintain), £1,440
 - Racecourse clearance - North Major Yorks, Nevill Park end (Gimbles), £2,400
 - Racecourse clearance - South Major Yorks near Fairground (S Young), £3,000
- Balance: £38,844

SLacey asked whether it was possible to allocate management time as a cost to the S106 reserves.

Action: The Clerk to investigate use of S106 reserves to include management time costs and feedback to Conservators.

Public Enjoyment Plan

The Clerk reported that work was ongoing on the Plan.

Fundraising

- Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL)

Work completed, final report submitted, and retrospective funding received.

- Sussex Lund Year two

Work completed. The Ranger now needs to submit the year-end report to request the retrospective funding.

Action: Ranger to complete year-end report for Year two of Sussex Lund funding.

- Friends of the Commons

The Clerk has organised and is working on the following projects on behalf of the Friends for 2025:

- Kent High Weald Partnership led forest school on Rusthall Common (11th April).
- Guided bat walk led by Sussex naturalist, author and guide, Michael Blencowe on Rusthall Common (23rd April).

- Guided butterfly walk led by Michael Blencowe on Tunbridge Wells Common (10th June).
- Fungi survey confirmed for 20025 and 2 x guided walks to be arranged.
- New written guide and map of the trees of note on Tunbridge Wells Common.

Kent County Council - Flood and Water Management

Since the last meeting, the infiltration basin to the north of Fairground car park has been cleared of poor-quality trees and awaits excavation of the basin, no date given for this work. The works to install the culvert and pipe across Major York's Road does not have a start date yet. Waterman Infrastructure and Environment Ltd have produced a revised version of their plans for the nature-based solutions, which requires Ranger and ecologist review.

Sink hole/Southern Water

Conservators have been made aware of the sink hole on the Common near Eridge Road, as it was reported in the Committee minutes. As a reminder the two significant risks are:

- H&S risk associated with the sink hole, which is now a significant hole due to digger investigation works.
- Raw sewage leaking into the ground and potentially into the River Grom.

Actions and updates to date:

- Three engineers have been to site as emergency response from Southern Water, there has been mixed feedback about the cause of the visible sewage leak, with Southern Water continuing to claim there is no fault with their assets.
- An engineer from Kent County Council (KCC's) Highways Team has been to site and does not believe it is their asset but has agreed to have the area made safe with temporary fencing and will excavate the area week commencing 28th April to better understand the pipe configuration and source of the leak.
- The Clerk has made several complaints to the Southern Water customer services team and now has a dedicated complaint handler managing the case. The ongoing request is to get a senior engineer to meet Officers at the site to discuss the leak and liabilities.
- MBrice has contacted Mike Martin MP to make him aware of the situation. This has resulted in the Clerk being connected with the Engagement Manager for Kent, they continue to say that there isn't a fault with their asset based on their emergency response engineer's reports and have not been to site. In response, the Clerk has explained that a site visit is needed and been told that County Network Manager for Kent is due to make contact.

Action: The Clerk to continue to update Conservators.

Tree management plans – TWBC and Forestry Commission

Conservators have been kept updated on a Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) Officer reporting the Conservators to the Forestry Commission for alleged illegal felling, via the Committee minutes. The Ranger is now working on plans to get a felling licence which will detail all plans for tree works and projects and which will satisfy TWBC's requirements to have reports on tree works within the Conservation Area. All other reporting requirements have now been confirmed with TWBC and the Ranger will be working in line with these systems.

TWBC Planning Department

In March, the Clerk led two guided walks on Tunbridge Wells Common for Officers of the Planning Department. The aim of the walks were to better connect and enhance communication with the Officers, to make them more aware of the value and uniqueness of the Commons, to discuss our legislation and statutory responsibilities, our protection as a Village Green and the direct challenges and impacts of planning decisions. Very positive feedback was received with the suggestion of similar walks to be arranged on Rusthall Common.

Planting of trees on Rusthall Common by owners of Dingley Dell

A request was made to the owners of Dingley Dell to remove the holly trees planted on land registered as Rusthall Common. Following the request, the owner asked the Clerk to communicate with his solicitor and communications were exchanged over many weeks. The final exchange reinforced the Conservator's position, that the trees needed to be removed, and notice was given that if the owner did not make arrangements to remove the trees himself, they would be removed week commencing 14th April. The Ranger confirmed that the trees had been removed.

Action: The Ranger to remove the tree stakes and straps and fill in the holes in the ground. It was agreed that the owner would not be contacted to reimburse costs.

Standing Orders and audit preparation

The Clerk and Treasurer continue to work through the recommendations of the Interim internal audit. The Clerk has prepared a draft version of the recommended Standing Orders, for Committee and then full Conservator review. Both the Clerk and Treasurer attended an online training session on the completion of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR).

Requests to Conservators

Since the last meeting there have been two requests to all Conservators:

Date of request	Detail	Outcome
25 th February 2025	Request to install a temporary sculpture as part of the Demelza fundraising trail on TW Common.	Approved.
2 nd April	Request to lay an informal sandstone surface on the Bumps path.	Approved.

8. ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT PLAN WORK SCHEDULE FOR Q4 2024/25

Work continues to progress well following the recommendations in the two Ecological Management Plans. Conservators approved the work schedule planned for quarter one 2025/6.

The Ranger has created a formal citizen science project opportunity using the iNaturalist App and is continuing to make the public aware of the opportunities that it presents for them to help with flora and fauna data collection.

9. RANGER'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL WORK PLAN

Trees

Ash dieback

The Ranger reported that the ash dieback tree stock, particularly the roadside trees, are now in a satisfactory position.

High Value Trees

Living Forest tree consultants have been commissioned to undertake surveys and provide a formal report on the following:

- A. Cherry trees on Mount Edgcumbe Road: objective to advise on how to look after these trees to keep them in the best possible health for as long as possible.
- B. Victoria Grove: objective to advise on safety and longevity and on the spacing of the lower row of trees.

- C. Chestnuts in the vicinity of The Forum: objective to advise on safety and longevity in the landscape.

The report for C has been received with the reports for A and B due in June.

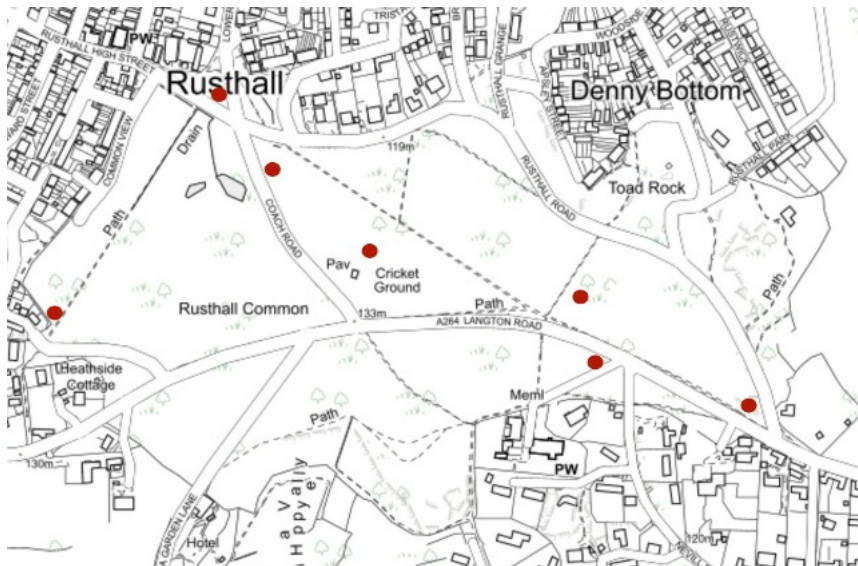
Other Trees

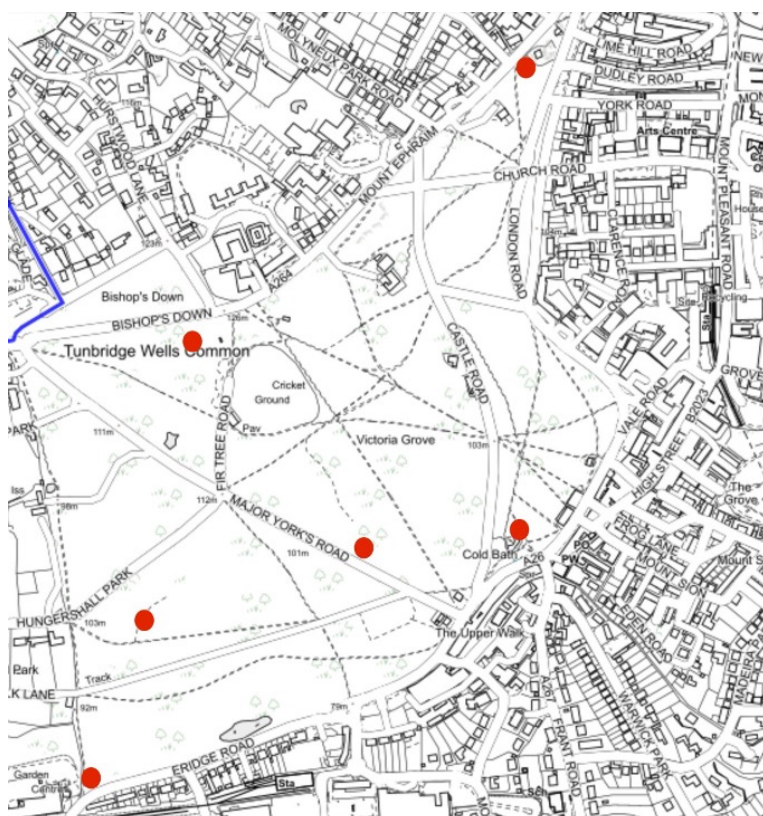
Given that it is now the bird nesting season, tree work will be limited to safety tree work on dead, dying or dangerous trees. The Ranger asked Living Forest for their views on fungal disease affecting a pair of lime trees adjacent to Castle Road and they advised that they need to be heavily pollarded during June this year. A quote has been obtained with the preferred contractor for £1,680, which Conservators approved.

Disease resistant elm trees

With the help of volunteers, the 13 disease resistant elms provided by the KCC tree planting project were all planted on the Commons in March 2025. Watering these trees is now an important element of the programme going forward over the next two years whilst they establish.

Maps of Elm tree locations:





Glade projects

In the last quarter there have been several glade clearance projects that have successfully taken place, many of which were highlighted on the pre-meeting walk. Each project is already proving highly successful in terms of the aesthetic, historical context and safety of vulnerable groups elements of our objectives. The ecological and biodiversity elements will increasingly bear fruit as the herb and understory layers improve over time.

Coralroot bittercress survey

In April, the Ranger volunteer groups conducted the annual coralroot survey. It is noted that the numbers recorded appear to have dropped significantly on previous counts. There are several possible reasons for this, and the Ranger is investigating regional data to see if this decline is part of a wider pattern, or a localised issue is.

Action: Ranger to research regional coralroot patterns and feedback to Conservators.

Flood mitigation works

Internal drainage improvements across both Commons have been a priority during the last quarter. Significant work has taken place to ensure that we can slow down, divert and hold water for as long as possible where appropriate. This is especially the case in relation to the London Road and Erudge Road catchment. However further drainage work was also undertaken at the Bumps and Happy Valley to improve the paths.

Bumps path

The Ranger had received a quote from Keith Bedford to supply fittleworth stone, supply plant and lay the material on the Bumps path for a total of £2,448. Conservators approved the spend but did ask the Clerk to investigate whether the S106 reserves could be used on Rusthall Common.

Action: The Clerk to contact the S106 Officer to discuss use of S106 funds.

Grass Management

Short/Amenity Grass Areas

There have been two short/amenity grass cuts so far this year.

Long Grass Areas

Gardens of England' has proven to be of an exceptionally professional standard. The work force is very capable, going above and beyond expectations and the working relationship has quickly settled into one which will prove highly beneficial for the Commons. The team have additional skills which will potentially be able to be utilised in relation to handyman areas also going forward.

Invasive Species

For the first time, budget was allocated to deal with invasive species this year. A local contractor will undertake the equivalent of four full days to take proactive control of Japanese knotweed, laurel and rhododendron ponticum.

Bollards

The Ranger has installed two high security removable bollards to prevent illegal ingress. Both were located on Hungershall Road as this is an area deemed to be at risk.

There appears to be an increasing issue with contractors parking on the lower island on the Inner London Road. The Ranger has confronted this issue and applied notification stickers on vehicles and had an unpleasant encounter with a vehicle owner. The existing bollards are at the end of their life and should be replaced with something more fit for purpose. The Ranger proposes to install a shin high chestnut post and single rail fence along the length of the vulnerable Inner London Road edge. The Ranger proposes to present the project and costs in more detail during Q3 so that Conservators can make a fully informed decision. Residents living adjacent to the area to be informed of the project if approved.

Great crested newt surveys

In 2023, the ponds on the Commons were tested using eDNA techniques to identify the presence of great crested newts. The Marlpit pond was the only watercourse that tested positive. The Ranger wanted to better understand the validity of the test and asked Peter Howarth, ecologist and licenced newt handler to set a bottle trap test in the pond. The results confirmed the presence of 3 females and 2 male great crested newts. The Ranger made a request to Conservators to conduct a full season of bottle trap surveying at a cost of £1,000 (£750 for 12 site visits and a follow up report). The report will provide details of population size and status. Conservators approved the request.

Action: The Clerk and Ranger to investigate further funding opportunities based on the data and report.

10. FINANCE

Accounts

The Treasurer presented the year end accounts which showed net income for the year was £13,800, £34,840 above budgeted net expenditure of £21,040 and £21,369 lower than last year's net income of £35,169. Last year's figures have been restated to exclude depreciation, with fixed assets now shown at cost, and planning agreement income, which is now shown in separate reserves.

Of the positive budget variance, £15,976 consists of additional income, including interest receipts, receipts from the Lund Fund and sales of new and refurbished benches. On the expenditure side, £11,470 arises under Maintenance of Commons, where expenditure on Trees, Paths and Tracks exceeded budget but other categories were generally underspent.

Conservators approved the unaudited year end accounts.

Adequacy of funds

As previously reported to the Conservators, adequacy of funds is now measured by comparing the accumulated General Reserve at the balance sheet date with a figure representing 30% of the Precept for the full year. The recommended minimum level is 25%, representing Precept income for three months. As shown at the foot of the balance sheet, the General Reserve at 31 March of £101,326 exceeded the 30% of Precept figure by £36,622.

Reserves

The balance sheet includes separate reserves relating to s106 planning contributions of £7,851 for Union House and £38,844 relating to Eridge Road, to be applied to relevant expenditure. Of the Union House balance, £5,000 has been informally 'ring fenced' for essential drainage works, leaving £2,851 for other expenditure.

Changes in accounting policies

As previously reported, after discussions with the new internal auditors it has been decided to cease accounting for depreciation on fixed assets. All depreciation previously accounted for during the current year and all previous years has been reversed out and reserves figures have been restated accordingly.

For commercial entities it is standard practice to write off the cost of an asset to reserves as depreciation over its useful life in order to reflect more accurately the entity's financial position. However, smaller authorities such as TWCC generally prepare accounts on a receipts and payments basis and show fixed assets at cost, while the AGAR (Annual Governance and Accountability Return) cannot be made to balance without including depreciation as a reconciling item.

Similarly, the accounts no longer show payments of insurance premiums and car tax as prepayments, to be amortised over the year, but they are recorded as an expense when incurred. This treatment already applies to Precept income, recorded as received every six months instead of spread evenly over the year. The Treasurer will, however, continue to accrue for invoices received and paid shortly after a quarter end as a way of maintaining comparability.

Potential VAT reclaim

Last quarter, the Treasurer reported that he had submitted a VAT126 claim to recover approximately £45,000 of past VAT incurred, under provisions relating to local authorities and similar bodies. The initial claim has been rejected and consideration is being given to the cost of making an appeal, after taking more detailed professional advice, against the likelihood of making a recovery. Conservators agreed that the size of the potential claim justified investing in expert advice.

Bank reconciliation

A reconciliation as at 31 March 2025, supported by copies of relevant bank statements, was provided for approval and signing.

Action: Bank reconciliation and statements to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

Asset register

All of the assets listed in the asset register had been visually checked off by the Clerk in advance of the meeting. Conservators approved the asset register. The Treasurer confirmed that not reporting depreciation was not going to create issues when items needed replacing due to their relatively small costs.

AGAR prior to audit

The Treasurer had presented the draft AGAR figures, which were approved by Conservators.

11. UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

CEvans provided an update from the Friends as follows:

- The Kent High Weald Partnership led forest school session on 11th April was a success, with 170 people attending the two sessions.
- The Friends had funded a very interesting presentation and guided bat walk with Micheal Blencowe on 23rd April, unfortunately no bats had actually been spotted on Rusthall Common during the walk.
- Membership numbers were stable. The use of email for sending out the Common Ground newsletter and use of the website was gradually increasing, releasing more funds for projects.
- The Friends offered to pay for more litter bins. The Clerk explained that they already had allocated budget for bins but would instead appreciate funding for further guided walks and talks.

12. MARKETING AND PR REPORT

The report highlighted that there had been articles published in the Town Crier and Rusthall Life.

The Facebook group now has 2,777 members with monthly reactions from members between 1,336 and 3,147.

The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

6. History of Rusthall book launch.
7. Damage to path edges by wide-wheeled motorbikes.
8. Evening bat walk event.
9. Full litter bin(s) (TWBC bins)
10. Hole in the sandpit in front of Wellington Rocks.

The Instagram account has 659 followers, while the website remains a popular source of information.

13. POLICY REVIEW

There were no policies requiring review for this meeting. It was noted that the Clerk and Treasurer were working on revised Financial Regulations and new Standing Orders as recommended by the internal audit.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- iv. Works to the surface of Fairground car park

PBurnett explained that Targetfollow were looking at ways to repair the surface of Fairground car park and that contractor, Keith Bedford, had proposed a concrete and gravel compound for the corners. PBurnett asked whether this would be acceptable to the Conservators. The Clerk reminded all that sealed surfaces were not allowed on the Village Green and that she would do further research to establish exactly what was and wasn't a sealed surface.

Action: The Clerk to contact the Open Spaces Society to get a definitive position on the definition of a sealed surface and report back to the Conservators.

v. Padel tennis

PBurnett had received two requests to install padel tennis courts on the Commons. The requests were rejected due to noise, visual intrusion and incompatibility with the Ecological Management Plan.

vi. Political campaigning on the Common.

CEvans reported that Reform UK had put up a gazebo on Rusthall Common by Common View as part of their political campaign. The Clerk was aware and confirmed that they had not go Conservator permission and that they had politely been asked to leave.

15. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

25/00160/FULL Badgers Holt, The Midway, Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN4 8NJ. Replacement of chalet bungalow with two-storey dwelling and garage, together with associated access and car parking.

On behalf of the Conservators the Clerk responded to object to the application based on the type and location of perimeter fence proposed.

MEETING ENDED: 14.51

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 19th June 2025, The Rackliff Centre, Rusthall.

Agreed Actions

Agenda Item	Detail	Responsibility	Progress/update
3 & 4	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Chair	Complete
5	Submit a full proposal to the Conservators, for the installation of electric car chargers for consideration.	PBurnett	
5	Common View meadow feasibility study, Ranger to feedback survey/observation data.	Ranger	Ongoing.
5	Investigate installation of paving slab by Major York's bus stop.	Ranger	KCC have confirmed that installing a slab is not appropriate, they have offered advice but will not fund as the bus stop is on private land.
6	To get tree stumps cut as low as possible to the ground on all projects moving forward.	Ranger	Complete. The larger stumps have been left at approximately 6 inches above ground level, to make obvious.
6	To consider whether a new fence above Cabbage Stalk Lane Pond is required and feedback to Conservators.	Ranger	Email sent to all Conservators confirming consideration.

7	To investigate use of S106 reserves to include management time costs and feedback to Conservators.	Clerk	N/A
7	To complete year-end report for Year two of Sussex Lund funding.	Ranger	In progress
7	To continue to update Conservators on the sink hole.	Clerk	Ongoing.
7	To remove the tree stakes and straps at Dingley Dell and fill in the holes in the ground. It was agreed that the owner would not be contacted to reimburse costs.	Ranger	Stakes and straps removed. Holes to be filled.
9	To research regional coralroot patterns and feedback to Conservators.	Ranger	
9	To contact the S106 Officer to discuss use of S106 funds.	Clerk	Complete
10	Bank reconciliation and statements to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.	Chair and Clerk	Complete
14	To contact the Open Spaces Society to get a definitive position on the definition of a sealed surface and report back to the Conservators.	Clerk	Ongoing, feedback in Clerk's report for June 2025 meeting.