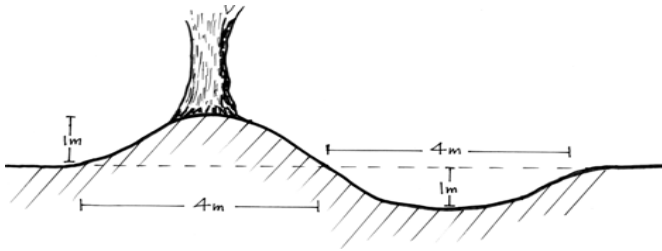


it is small compared with many ancient woodbanks in other parts of the country and Oliver Rackham, the acknowledged authority on woodland archaeology, would therefore perhaps place it as going back no further than Medieval times.



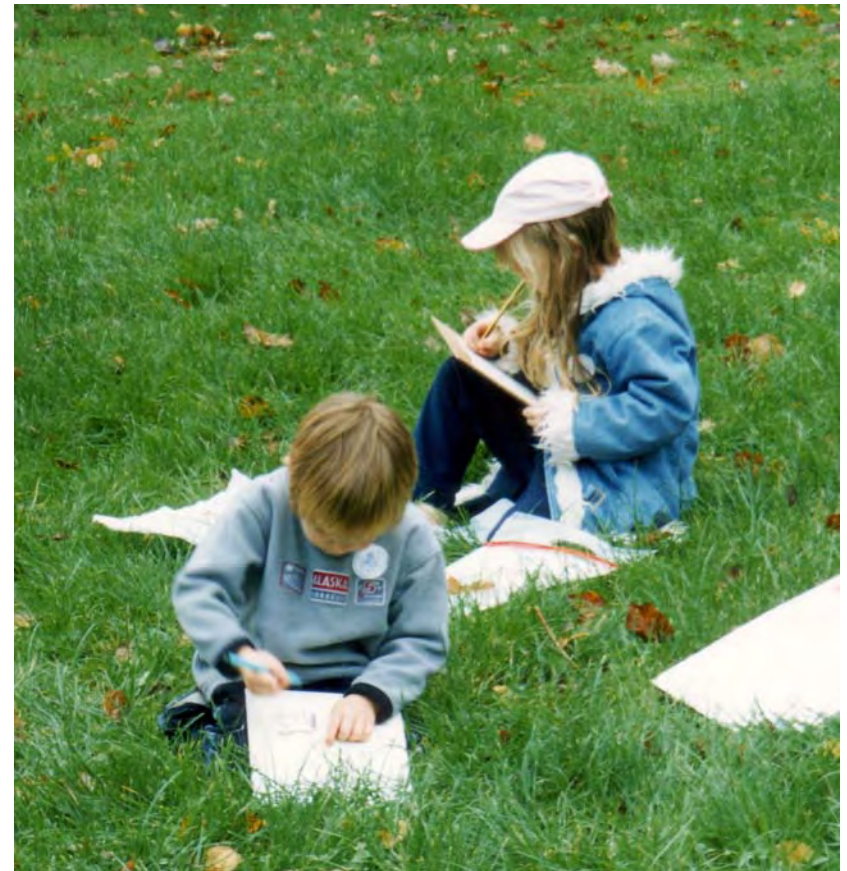
Without a doubt the bank has become eroded and the ditch has accumulated sediment and so, even where it is most marked, the bank is no more than 1 metre high and 4 metres across and the ditch 1

metre deep, compared with the adjacent ground, and 4 metres wide. Along much of its length the bank is topped by irregularly spaced pollarded oaks, this being a typical feature of woodbanks. These trees, judging by their girth, are between 130 and 200 years old, but rather than indicating that the bank was, in fact, created in the early 19th century, these trees were probably planted in order to replace earlier trees which had become senescent.

Woodbanks were typically constructed in order to keep grazing animals out of woodland in which coppicing was being practiced. Most broad-leaved trees, when cut back to the ground, sprout several new shoots, forming what is termed a coppice (as distinct from a pollard, which has the trunk cut around ten feet from the ground). The average hazel coppice, for example, can be harvested every 7 to 10 years, yielding several branches which are ideal for making hurdles. Sweet chestnut was commonly coppiced as a source of fencing poles and firewood. Recently cut coppices had to be protected from sheep, cattle and goats, because they would find the freshly sprouting shoots very palatable. For this reason the woodbank pollards would support a hurdle fence between them, which would last long enough to protect the coppice shoots until they became established. The fence would be renewed after each harvesting of wood.

It would be very unusual for the coppiced woodland side of the woodbank not to be on the left in the diagram, the grazed land being on the ditch side. Is this how matters were on St Paul's Cray Common? The very name, common, confirms that this was common land on which local people had grazing rights. Webb's *History of Chislehurst* describes the common prior to around 1870 as being an expanse of heather and gorse, with occasional trees, whereas the land to the west and east was wooded. St Paul's Cray Common is on the ditch side of the woodbank and on the other side one can find the odd chestnut that appears to have 4 or 5 trunks, indicating that it was once coppiced.

In days of yore, when our commons were extensively grazed, they would have had a very different appearance, as would the adjacent woods, when regularly harvested. Without the shading effect of large trees, both had a much greater variety of flowering plants, including several species of orchid.



On 16th October, Chislehurst joined the fun of the UK's biggest community art event, The Big Draw. On the Common between School Road and Church Row, as well as in St Nicholas Church, the churchyard and the function room in The Crown, over 300 people of all ages took part. There is a full report inside.

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“They haven’t cut all the grass!”

“Quite true, but not because we were too lazy to cut and rake it”, says JAN HENDEY, who leads the Conservators’ Natural Environment Committee.

When the new Management Plan for the Commons was drawn up recently, we were advised by the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (from which we receive grant support) that it is good practice to leave some areas uncut as a refuge for wildlife. Accordingly, triangles on each side of the large Overflow Glade on Chislehurst Common and areas near the Rambler’s Rest and the Cockpit, for example, will be left for a few years. The types of grasses that grow in these places are naturally short and the top growth dies back during the winter.

What sort of wildlife will benefit? It will be mainly insects. Grasshoppers, beloved by children, are abundant in these areas. Many grasshoppers and their relatives, the bush crickets, overwinter as eggs laid either at the base of grasses, or in the surface layers of the soil where the grass covering gives some protection from predators and from severe cold.

Butterflies are rather more glamorous and most species seen in Britain will hibernate during winter. (A few, for example, the painted lady, are summer migrants from the Continent.) Many, such as the meadow brown, small copper and skipper, overwinter as caterpillars, curled up in a tight ball at the base of vegetation. Others, such as the orange tip and holly blue, become pupae (chrysalids) with a protective covering for the winter, and the speckled wood can hibernate either as caterpillars or as pupae. All of these butterflies can be seen fairly frequently on the Commons. By leaving some of our grass uncut we will be helping their survival through the winter and we will enjoy their bright colours and rapid movements in the summer.

And now JOHN MITCHELL reports in detail on the butterfly scene.

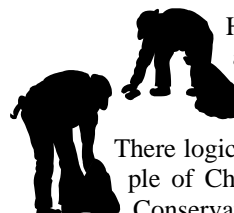
In recent years many species have suffered huge declines nationwide, in some cases falling to less than 10 per cent of their former numbers. There are still butterflies to be seen on the Commons, though no doubt far fewer than in the past. It is very important to monitor what we have, checking on changes in the populations and considering what habitat management can be undertaken to improve conditions for them.

In the early part of 2004 a butterfly transect was set out on Chislehurst Common. This is a fixed route, which is walked each week, recording all

Ramblings of one of the Chombles of Chislehurst

In a three-day ‘extravaganza’ from 29th to 31st October, I found and emptied 41 large and small waste bins on the Commons. This comprised 28 green or grey concrete pipe bins, plus 11 bins of this type at bus stops and 2 LBB lamp post bins. I estimate that this took me 16 working hours and I filled 30 large bin bags for transport to Waldo Road waste depot.

Much of the waste was Sainsbury’s plastic bags filled with grass cuttings, leaves or just household waste. The rest was tree prunings, dog faeces in plastic bags, newspapers, plastic and metal drink cans, bus tickets and food wraps. By the way, I found that Stella Artois is the most popular beer drunk in Chislehurst (at least by those who drink alfresco).



Having collected all this waste using voluntary labour on a relatively light week (I am told the schools were on half-term), it needed to be shipped to Waldo Road.

There logic defied me. Having given my labour free of charge to the people of Chislehurst, the London Borough of Bromley then charged the Conservators £50, as they do each week, or £2,500 a year for processing. Would it not be cheaper to leave the bins to overflow?

This Herculean labour does have its compensations, however. I was rewarded handsomely by finding 3 one penny pieces, 1 laptop computer bag, 1 school haversack and seven wheel hub covers. I will soon have enough for my next boot sale!



There is nothing like actually doing the job to get all the facts and faeces!

The St Paul’s Cray Common woodbank

When next you are walking on St Paul’s Cray Common make sure you take note of the woodbank which separates the Common from Petts Wood. The bank, with its parallel ditch, starts near the Conservators’ and National Trust display boards and runs southwestwards, on the right of the bridle path leading past the Willett Memorial. Where the volunteers recently carried out some clearance of holly, just before you get to the Memorial, you can see the ditch and bank to your right. At this end the feature is well marked, but after making a dog-leg turn, near the cleared area of National Trust land, it gradually peters out. How old is this earthwork and what does it signify?

Dr Nicola Bannister, a landscape archaeologist, whose survey of Hawkwood Estate and Petts Wood was published in 1997, considered the woodbank to be “probably the oldest known archaeological feature” of the area. It could conceivably date back to Roman times. However, being no more than around 8 metres in total width,

Continued overleaf

Heathland restoration

Walkers on St Paul's Cray Common will know of the heathland now stretching from near St Paul's Cray Road across to the bridlepath parallel to Manor Park. The development of this heath from two isolated patches of heather took nearly ten years of work, largely by our volunteers. When the heather blooms in late summer the swathe of colour attracts many people and the flowers provide food for scores of bees, butterflies, other smaller flies, with dragonflies hawking for the abundant insects.

One of the creatures feeding on the leaves of the heather is the heather beetle. This is a normal component of the heath community, but occasionally, probably due to climatic conditions, it shows a population explosion. This happened here a few years ago and the heather was badly eaten and many plants died. We were advised that the situation would correct itself if left alone. To some extent the heather appears to be recovering, with the exception of one patch, which was re-seeded in December in attempt to resurrect it.

Undeterred by the constant threat from the heather beetle, we plan to enlarge the heath by reclaiming another area along the side of the bridlepath, land which is currently covered with bracken or holly thicket. The initial work will be spread over three years and will involve clearing the ground, scraping away the accumulated peat from the surface and seeding on to the bare gravelly soil. Heather seed does not germinate well on highly organic surfaces. Under the best of circumstances germination is slow, so please be patient.

Over the past 200 years 95 per cent of Kent's heathland has disappeared. Until 100 years ago much of Chislehurst and St Paul's Cray Commons was heathland. The change to woodland — some of it impenetrable scrub — came about largely as a consequence of the removal of grazing animals. Heathland restoration is now a top priority in national and local biodiversity action plans.

You are welcome to come and encourage the volunteers once they start removing the growth of bramble and bracken and other opportunistic weeds which will inevitably appear after the clearance.

Elsewhere, on Chislehurst Common, there are remnants of former heather areas, notably in the corner of the Cricket Ground near Bromley Road and on one side of the Overflow Glade. We are attempting to enhance these by "conservation gardening" methods. Dense grass is being reduced from around existing young heather plants at the Cricket Ground and more seed will be sown. Surprisingly, there are no young plants on the Overflow Glade, although there are bare patches in the grass. Here we have put seed from the existing plants into small depressions scraped in the soil. Additionally, seed has been taken in order to attempt pot germination and, if successful, young "plug plants" can be planted out later in the year at both sites. This sort of "miniaturised" restoration is felt to be more acceptable in places of high public use, rather than the more radical clearance and scrape we plan on St Paul's Cray Common.

JAN HENDEY

the species seen. Slowly walking the transect takes about 45 minutes. It needs to be done once a week, from the beginning of April to the end of September, between 10.45 and 15.45 in warm, bright weather. Up to now I have carried out this work single-handed and so help would be appreciated in order to cover weeks when I am not available. If any readers are interested in this pleasant job, please leave your contact details for me at the Old Fire Station and I will get in touch with you during March.

In the winter months, while there are no butterflies to be seen, work is in progress to improve conditions for them. Some of the fruits of this labour can be seen along the footpath from the Overflow Glade to the Prince Imperial Monument. Both sides of the path are being cleared in order to create small glades which will let in sunlight and form basking places for butterflies. Other areas will be similarly treated. This work is being undertaken by the volunteer group which meets every Wednesday morning. (A second group meets on the first Saturday of each month.) New volunteers are always welcome. Further details can be obtained from the Old Fire Station.

BIG EXPENDING PLANS over the next 5 years

A recent meeting of the Board of Conservators approved outline plans for expenditure in excess of £100,000 over the next 5 years in maintaining and improving the Commons.

Contractors will be employed to clear the ground for an extension of the heather area (as explained in this issue), to complete the re-embanking of Rush Pond and to clear more areas of holly scrub each winter. Provided we are successful in a grant application, £25,000 will be spent on improving the main footpaths and bridleways.

Reed beds will be established at Rush Pond and Prickend Pond and it is hoped to install an aeration system which would operate during prolonged hot weather. By means of judicious felling, more small glades will be opened up on parts of the main footpaths. Our one small truck will have to be replaced, as will the wood-chipper. A side-arm flail will be acquired.

Some of the cost will be covered by grants from the government's Countryside Stewardship Scheme. We are delighted to report that we have been promised donations from the Chislehurst Society and the Rotary Club of Chislehurst. And our principal benefactors will remain the generous Friends of the Commons.

The Big Draw



The Big Draw offered an opportunity to encourage whole families to capture the fun of drawing while raising awareness of the wonderful resource we have in the Common.

In preparation for the big day every local primary school student was given a bookmark advertising the event and local businesses were asked for sponsorship. As the weather was quite changeable in mid-October, the organisers set up gazebos around the Common, just in case it should rain. We had bunting and banners giving a festive look to the event. The Conservators supported the day by setting up a stand introducing their work and explaining their responsibility for managing the Commons.

Over 300 people came for a few hours of alfresco drawing, each donating £1 for a pack containing pens and pencils, a selection of papers, brochures on *How To Get Started Drawing* and *What's Special About Our Commons* and tokens allowing children to obtain soft drinks, provided free by The Crown and The Tiger's Head.

The participants were invited to draw the trees, the buildings or other people. They could take rubbings in the churchyard or draw views inside St Nicholas Church. The Chislehurst Artists' Group helped by setting up easels and inspired others by means of their own drawings and paintings of local scenes. The function room of

The Crown was packed with people working on sections of a 20-foot mural depicting the Victorian houses on Church Row

The Chislehurst Family Fun Big Draw was a great success. It reminded everyone who came along that we are part of a community, with shared interests to enjoy. It was a pleasant and relaxed family day. At the end of the afternoon everyone had a smile and was pleased with what he or she had accomplished as part of this shared experience.

A selection of the pictures was displayed at Chislehurst Library and photographs are posted on the Conservators' web-site (www.chislehurstcommons.org). Not only was it a great afternoon, but £620 was raised to support the vital work of the Conservators, who have unanimously and heartily endorsed the plan to host the event again in 2005.

DONNA BOMPAS

