

capturing solids and providing a home for bacteria which break down many of the pollutants in the water. Being a wetland plant, *Phragmites* transfers atmospheric oxygen down to the roots in order to survive in waterlogged conditions. Oxygen from the roots allows aerobic bacteria to thrive and feed on the undesirable substances around them whilst not releasing nasty smells.

When working at their best reed beds reduce solids by over 90 per cent, nitrogen and phosphorus nutrients by around 50 per cent and faecal bacteria by over 90 per cent and so the water reaching the pond is rather cleaner than when it entered the head of the ditch.

Will it work?

Well, a reed bed works best when the roots are wet and the weather is warm. If we have a long dry spell the reeds will not enjoy it, but on the other hand there will be no water needing to be cleaned. We will have to look after the bed. We have already carried out some weeding and removal of litter and this will have to be a regular job. The tops of the plants naturally die back in winter, but fresh shoots will appear during May and the plants will produce their main growth in June and July.

Reed beds on Rush Pond

On the anniversary of the installation of the Prickend Pond reed bed we were due to take delivery of 280 metre square pallets for Rush Pond, but, at the time of going to press, they are still ice-bound in Norfolk. This work will be largely financed by a £6,000 grant from Natural England.

Preparatory work has been done at the two ends of Rush Pond, digging out areas into which the reeds will be laid. We hope this will clean up the water flowing into the pond and reduce the likelihood of that ugly greenish-brown bloom we so often see in the summer as the diminishing pond comes to resemble the primeval soup in which they say life began.

Holly-bashing continues

It is not that we hate holly; it is a handsome, evergreen and natural member of any English woodland community. It's just that there is so much of it and its dense thickets crowd out other plants and make the woods impenetrable. For several years our Volunteers and keepers have been thinning it and checking its pernicious re-growth. This can be carried out only in the winter months, in order to avoid causing disturbance during the birds' nesting season. The work of the Volunteers is augmented by contractors. You may have noticed a contractor recently at work on St Paul's Cray Common between the Holbrook House and Scadbury entrances. Larger logs are left in small stacks, providing safe havens for wild-life and the rest of the debris is chipped into piles which slowly rot and make a home for lots of mini-beasts.

Friends OF THE Commons



Winter 2009



Do you recognise anybody? Probably not. This is the Chislehurst Fire Brigade outside the Fire Station in 1912. Rather a lot of them; but it must be remembered that they were all volunteers, who answered the call of the fired maroons and that some might not get there in time. Located in Hawkwood Lane, on the opposite corner from the Tiger's Head, it is now called the *Old* Fire Station and is the headquarters of the Trustees of the Commons. The Brigade was established in 1868, but had no serious call-out until 1878. The Station was built on glebe (church) land in 1893. This was the same year that the Parish Council took responsibility for the local oil-lamp street-lighting. The Brigade are seen showing off their new fire engine, their first motorised engine. With 42 horse-power, its registration number was D 8032. It was built by Merryweather & Sons Ltd of Greenwich, a firm that specialised in fire appliances and trams.

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The Commons web-site: www.chislehurstcommons.org

Go to the ant thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise.

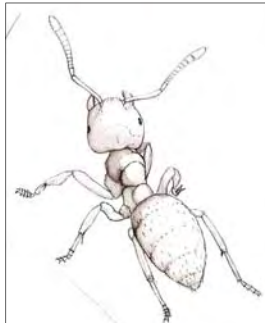
(Proverbs 6, 6)

Our ant hills and acid grassland

At one time Chislehurst and St Paul's Cray Commons were predominantly grassland with lots of gorse and heather, with planted trees marking boundaries and pathways. The soil being poor and of little use for arable farming the ground was grazed by the animals of the local commoners. The infertility of the soil and the vigilance of local people protected a great deal of the commons from the enclosures which were rife between the 16th and 19th centuries. No sooner had grazing stopped, which it had by the early years of the last century, than tree seedlings flourished and grassland became woodland. However, we are lucky enough still to have sizable areas of acid grassland, some of it ancient and some of it re-created, adding to the mosaic of habitats which constitute our Commons.

Acid grassland develops on low-nutrient mildly acidic soils over-lying the sort of fast-draining sand and gravel found at a depth of a few inches all around Chislehurst. There is a characteristic flora, including sheep's sorrel, wavy hair-grass, common bent, cat's ear, heath bedstraw and harebell, all of which are to be found on our ground. In summer months, if you look across from the Cockpit towards School Road, there is a low, rusty-red haze made by the thousands of tiny flowers and fruits of sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*). In that same area, and also on the other side of Watts Lane, there are hundreds of ant hills, which are a characteristic feature of ground which has been grassland for a very long time.

Each ant hill is the result of the labours of generations of the yellow meadow ant (*Lasius flavus*). Worker ants, numbering 10,000 or more in each mound, create burrows by carrying particles of soil to the surface and, as the bump grows, it becomes a network of tunnels in which the ants tend the egg-laying queen and her young. The advantage of the mound is that it collects warmth from the sun and never becomes waterlogged. The ants feed on root aphids. Like their above-ground cousins, the root aphids suck the sap from plants and excrete a sweet fluid ('honeydew') for which the ants 'milk' them. The ant hills on either side of Watts Lane could have been there for a century or more.



The yellow meadow ant, actual length 3-5 mm.

Several years ago there was an extensive fire on Chislehurst Common and advantage was taken of this to clear the debris and allow the ground to return to grassland. This area is the large glade just to the north of the Prince Imperial Monument. So successful has been this restoration project that when the variety of its flora was surveyed in the summer of 2008, using a method devised by Natural England, the quality of the grassland came into the category 'good'.

reaches the pond. On top of the liner we then laid fine gravel and soil, which had been dug out from the ditch. On top of this we laid the reed pallets. We then tidied up the sides of the ditch so that nobody could see we had been there. In the following week we raked and levelled the surrounding ground and re-seeded it with a mixture of appropriate grass species. For a few months the ditch was fenced in order to keep the marauding geese away from the young reed shoots.



The protective blanket has been laid and the troops are ready with the butyl liner.

Why the reed bed?

Well, that ditch is the main source of water for the pond. It is fed by several nearby road drains as well as water collected from the main Commons footpath which emerges at the junction of Centre Common Road and Prince Imperial Road. The water from the roads is not particularly sweet. It carries all the pollutants generated by motor vehicles: hydrocarbons, heavy metals and nitrogen compounds, as well as salt and the out-wash of dog fouling. Who'd be a fish in Prickend Pond? Who'd be a duck? This foul soup enriches the pond with unwanted nutrients leading to algal blooms in hot weather, de-oxygenating the water and suffocating the fish. The stuff also finds a home in the silt at the bottom of the pond, leading to anaerobic bacterial activity, which emits noxious gases whenever the mud is stirred.

But for the run-off from surrounding roads there would be no pond. In effect, it is a giant soak-away.

How does it work?

The reed bed will help to clean up the water. The reeds belong to the species *Phrag-*

where it is produced in the same way and remains the biggest selling bottled water brand. Perhaps the Americans have not heard of the Sidcup debacle.

And while we are having a go at Coca-Cola, let's remember the Fanta cans we pick up from the Commons by the score. This is another of their brands. In January 2009 their Fanta fizzy fruit drinks were found to contain 300 times the level of pesticides permitted in tap water. This does not make the sale of the drinks illegal; after all, you are paying a premium for the extra ingredients. The pesticides are used on fruit while it is growing and while in storage and enters the Fanta in the fruit juice flavourings. Well, at least the children's stomachs will not develop mildew.

News from the ponds

The more observant will have noticed, during last summer, a strange looking bird among the Canada geese on Prickend Pond. This was an Egyptian goose, introduced into this country from Africa in the 18th century. At first confined to estates in northern East Anglia it has now spread and is fairly common along the non-tidal Thames. It was a surprise to see one at Prickend Pond. It is smaller than the Canada goose and lacks the black neck and head. The legs are long and pink and the plumage is brown. Our visitor eventually left, probably in search of a mate.

The crowd of mallard ducks on the ponds this winter is reflective of the good breeding season in 2008. Six clutches of ducklings hatched, numbering 3, 4, two clutches of 7, one of 8 and one of 11. These numbers were reduced, probably by predation and I suspect the heron was the chef culprit. The small black and white tufted ducks were also successful, hatching three clutches of ducklings numbering 3, 4 and 10. The clutch of 10 was hatched in a garden at some distance from the pond and the tiny ducklings were marched by their mother first to Rush Pond and then on to Prickend Pond. This was a traffic-stopping sight to behold.

JOHN MITCHELL

Reed beds

On January 9th last year, the keepers and Friends' Volunteers had a very busy day. In one fell swoop they laid a 40-metre reed bed in the main feeder ditch of Prickend Pond. The ditch had already been widened using a digger. Between 8 and 9 am we unloaded 200 metre-square coir 'pallets', or sacks, pre-planted with reeds. Having just been lifted from a lagoon in Norfolk they were sopping wet and pretty heavy.

We then lined the ditch with a fibre-glass blanket. On top of this was laid a butyl rubber liner. The blanket protects the liner from puncture by the underlying gravel and the liner ensures that all the water coming in at the head of the ditch eventually

"Why haven't you cut all the grass?" This question was answered in the Autumn 2004 issue of the Friends Newsletter (available on our web-site), but there is no harm in further elaboration. The grassland with the ant hills is never cut, because doing so would flatten and destroy them. For comparison take a look at the area between the Cockpit and Church Row, where repeated mowing — long before the present Trustees took office, it must be stressed! — has completely flattened the ground.

Ant hills between the Cockpit and School Road.



There are other small areas which are left uncut for several years, being occasionally weeded in order to remove tree seedlings, bramble and ivy. Other areas, such as that near the Rambler's Rest, are mown just once each year, at the end of the growing season, once the grasses and wild flowers have dropped their seeds. As soon as possible after mowing, the cut grass is raked up by our Friends' Volunteers and removed. This is tough work and probably the Volunteers' least favoured job, but it is important in ensuring that the following spring's growth is not buried by the matted remains of the previous season and that we do not have a virtual mulch building up nutrients in the soil. That would simply encourage invasion by coarse grasses like cocksfoot, rye grass and couch and other plants like nettles, thistles and rosebay willowherb

Although not obliged to do so by the Weeds Act 1959 and the Ragwort Control Act 2003, we do try to pull up as much ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) as possible, because, like a few other plants, it can be poisonous to grazing animals. We have no grazing animals, apart from the occasional hungry horse, but we consider that we should do our bit in controlling this wind-dispersed weed.

In August, when that bank of willowherb opposite The Crown comes into flower, you will see us cutting it down before it gets a chance to spread its seed among the nearby ant hills. But that gorgeous spread of soapwort alongside Morley Road is left untouched; it knows how to behave itself.

Continued

Our mowing policy for the acid grasslands seeks to protect insects as well as plant diversity. The common green grasshopper and the bush cricket overwinter as eggs laid either at the base of the grasses or in the surface layers of the soil and so our mowing machinery is not set to give a short back and sides. The meadow brown, small copper and small skipper butterflies, which you may be lucky enough to see fluttering over the grass in summer, overwinter as caterpillars tucked up at the base of plants.

At any time of the year you will see the green woodpecker digging for ants.

Acid grassland is considered an important habitat for nature conservation throughout the country. In Chislehurst we have one of only ten or so sizable sites in the whole of Greater London and so it is part of our heritage which must be given a lot of tender loving care.



Two selections of full-colour cards, showing either winter scenes or summer scenes on the Commons are available from the Trustees' office, The Old Fire Station, Hawkwood Lane, Monday to Friday, from 10.30 to 12.00, 0208 467 1886. Alternatively, 'phone Elizabeth Greenwood, 01689 897394 for free delivery.

Cards for all occasions

Each pack contains 8 cards, together with envelopes. The cards are blank inside. £4 per pack. £10 for 3 packs. All proceeds go to the Commons.

The cards will be on sale at the Friends' Reception on 4th April.



record the crime; we had to telephone Bromley Police Station in order to do that. If we had not reported it, there would have been no crime and so the statistics would have looked a tiny bit better.

Local residents may take one or two used tyres to the Waldo Road facility, but Bromley Council cannot take responsibility for the 1000-odd we had dumped on the Common between October and December.

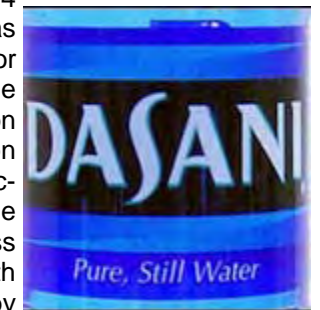


The essential fashion accessory: the water bottle; and we have to pick 'em up, by the million.

Global sales of bottled water have been rising about 8 per cent annually. A blessing of the current recession may be a halt to this unfathomable phenomenon. But what could be greener than natural water? Well, tap water.

Making those plastic bottles uses an enormous amount of fossil fuels and shipping the water in them, from as far afield as Norway and even Fiji, burns up a load more fuel. That kind of plastic is called PET, which is short for polyethylene terephthalate. In manufacturing one ton of it, three tons of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere. In this country only 17 per cent of PET bottles are currently recycled, the rest being incinerated, releasing carcinogens such as dioxins, or going into landfill, where they will take thousands of years to break down. Even the plastic that is destined for recycling may be shipped as far as China, burning up more oil along the way.

40 per cent of bottled water does not come from Highland springs or deep wells of purest heavenly dew, but from the municipal water supply — tap water. Did we not all laugh like drains in March 2004 on learning that the Coca-Cola plant at Sidcup was bottling the same water we get from our taps for 0.03p per half litre and selling it for 95p. Dasani, the new life-style drink, was launched with a £7 million advertising campaign. Then first came the revelation that it was tap water, admittedly filtered by the process they use in space for recycling the water in urine (it may be rocket science, but it is the same process as used in most domestic filtration units) and with some minerals added. This was quickly followed by the news that a bad batch of minerals had contaminated the water with a potential carcinogen. Half a million bottles were withdrawn from circulation and, just 5 weeks after its launch, Dasani collapsed. But not in the United States,



Continued

Getting it off my chest ...

No issue of the Friends' Newsletter would be complete without a splenetic diatribe on litter.

On the Monday after the end of the schools' Autumn Term a team of 10 volunteers together collected over 300 kilograms (in old money about a third of a ton) of litter from the Commons footpaths and adjacent pavements and verges. We know the quantity because the Keeper's truck was taken on to the weighbridge at Waldo Road. This enormous crop was despite the routine collecting undertaken by our Volunteers.

By no means can Coopers School be blamed for all of it. The verges along Prince Imperial Road, Centre Common Road, Kemnal Road and Bromley Road accumulate the trash thrown from passing cars: bottles and cans, cigarette packets, pizza boxes, soiled nappies etc. Our brave volunteers plunged into the undergrowth in order to retrieve fossil litter, in other words, the junk that has been there for months, becoming visible when the greenery dies back in the winter.

Of course, the schoolchildren continue to contribute a generous share, especially at the bus stops and along certain roads and footpaths. One day the residents of Church Row will rise up in righteous wrath and bury the litter-pigs under a mountain of their own rubbish.



The removal of fly-tipped car tyres cost us over £1,200 during 2008. At the time of going to press we have another hundred or so on Chislehurst Common awaiting collection by a specialist contractor. That lot appeared on 12th December and was immediately set alight by the lunatic crooks who dumped it. Quite apart from the toxicity of the smoke from burning rubber, the fire could have spread the few yards to the nearby Fairlight and Fallowfield care home. The Fire Brigade dowsed the flames (see above) and, although the police were in attendance, they would not

A date for your diary

**SATURDAY 4 APRIL
7.30 pm**

**The Friends of the Commons
ANNUAL RECEPTION
The Church Hall, Church Lane**

The Trustees of Chislehurst Commons take this opportunity to thank our donors and volunteer workers.

RSVP using the form enclosed.

Familiar faces about the Commons



Our new Second Keeper, Peter Edwards (left) with Head Keeper, Jonathan Harvie. Our ability now to employ two full-time keepers is thanks to the generosity of the Friends of the Commons.



Scenes from
The 2008 BIG DRAW

The biggest and most successful yet. Hundreds of children — and adults — had a wonderful time on a sunny afternoon on the Common. The organisers made a magnificent donation of £2,600 to the Commons.



Pictures by Nicola Fuller

Book now
The 2009 BIG DRAW
on Saturday 26th September.

A wonderful thing about the Big Draw is seeing so many children enjoying themselves. One of the memorable things about the recent snow was the number of children playing on the Commons. This open space should be an all-year adventure playground for many more of them.