

For the

Friends of the Commons



An occasional newsletter for the Friends of Chislehurst and St Paul's Cray Commons

Summer 2004



The picture on the left was taken in January 2004, a view of the impenetrable holly jungle typical of so many areas of the Commons. And ...

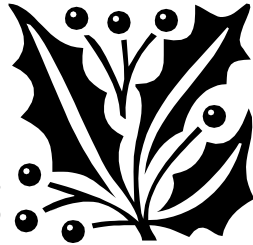
... the picture on the right was taken from the same spot in June 2004, showing the change brought about by the scrub clearance on Chislehurst Common in February 2004, financed by the generous *Friends Of The Common*. Inside Jan Hendey explains the benefits of such management operations.



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Controlling holly is like painting the Forth Bridge

“Of all the trees that are in the wood
The holly bears the crown.”



Alas, even crowned heads can go too far, as holly has on the Commons and the peasants have risen up against it.

JAN HENDEY, who heads the Conservators' Natural Environment Committee, explains

During the last twenty years or so, holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) has become dominant in the shrub layer to the detriment of other species. The reasons are not clear. Perhaps climate change has affected the viability of the seed; or perhaps it is a consequence of the 1987 storm when some of the canopy was opened up. Holly spreads in two ways. Some birds are very fond of the berries and the seeds in them will germinate after they have passed through the gut of the bird. This will result in a number of well separated holly trees, especially in open woodland and scrub areas. This is perfectly acceptable. However, holly also has the unfortunate habit of dipping its lower branches to the ground where the arched stem will take root, the tip turning upwards to form a new bush. In this way a single bush or tree can become surrounded by a tangle of growth, eventually forming an impenetrable thicket. Light no longer reaches the ground, causing smaller shrubs and ground flora to die out and other trees to become spindly and misshapen.

On the other hand, holly has a number of desirable features. It is a normal component of the woods and commons and we do not intend to eradicate it. As an evergreen it provides aesthetic variety in the winter when its glossy, spiny leaves have a charm of their own, especially when cobwebbed or frosted. We like to see the red berries in the autumn (also the orange and yellow berried forms which occur on the Commons) and of course, the berries are a valuable winter food for the birds, even though they increase the problem of spread. The flowers, buds and berries of holly provide the food for the dainty little holly-blue butterfly, which occurs frequently here.

As part of the Conservators' Management Plan we are committed to reducing the amount of holly on the Commons. Over several winters the Commons Volunteers have cut down holly in many areas and last February, thanks to the generosity of the Friends of the Commons, we were able to employ contractors to carry out a major clearance between the two glades on Centre Common. This work has resulted in a much more open aspect which will provide pleasanter and safer walking for us all. The full stature of some of the larger trees can be better appreciated now that their

evergreen skirts have been removed. The most important ecological benefit is that more light can reach the path edges and the woodland floor. This should allow better development of other desirable understorey species such as rowan, birch and hazel, and of flowering plants such as cow-wheat, wood sage, tormentil and heath bedstraw.

Holly has started re-growing from cut stumps in the cleared area. The contractor is returning next February, 12 months after the clearance, in order to treat the re-growth with herbicide, which should permanently knock it on the head.

No doubt the bare areas will also grow bracken, bramble and ivy and these will have to be controlled. In former times gorse was much more extensive on the Common and seed is likely to spread from plants around the margins of some of the cleared areas. Various grasses should also develop, with sheep's sorrel, cat's ear and perhaps heather.

All of this will be beneficial to the birds, butterflies and other insects and will help to fulfil another aim of the Management Plan: to increase the biodiversity of the Commons.

Public comment on last February's clearance has, so far, been entirely positive. The Conservators, in their new Management Plan, envisage carrying out more such clearances as funds allow. Please do write and let us know what *you* think.

CROSS-OVERS – A Postscript

In our Winter 2004 issue of the Friends' newsletter, ANTHONY BOMPAS offered advice to local residents whose properties are reached by crossing a Commons verge. There have been two developments in recent months which may be of interest to you.

At the time of writing our last Newsletter the title to St. Paul's Cray Common had not yet been registered. This has now changed: in March 2004 the freehold was registered in the name of the Lord of the Manor (LoM), namely Princess Lobanov Rostovsky (previously Lady Rankin) and Clover Investment Co Ltd. This would mean that the time limits for exercising any right given by section 68 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, described in our previous Newsletter (available on our web-site), could start to run so far as concerns St. Paul's Cray Common. The time limits could already have started in relation to Chislehurst Common, which has been registered since 1999.

Continued

The second development is more important. On 1 April 2004 the House of Lords gave judgment in a case of considerable significance. In *Bakewell Management Ltd v Brandwood* [2004] UKHL 14 the House of Lords changed what had previously been thought to be the law and now held that it was possible for someone to acquire by prescription a right of way for motor cars over common land.

The effect of this decision is that the LoM will not be able to compel householders to purchase a right to cross the Commons with cars to reach their houses, where for a period of at least 20 years the householders have been exercising such a right without the LoM's permission. Indeed, the decision in *Bakewell* appears to render section 68 of the 2000 CROW Act a dead letter: it is difficult to see why anyone who was in a position to rely on that provision should wish to do so, as that provision would only give the right to pay for something to which the person was already entitled.



JOHN MITCHELL looks after the bird boxes and bat boxes on the Commons and monitors the populations for us. Here is his report for June and July.

Of the 44 nest boxes 30 were occupied this season. Three of the nests were abandoned for reasons unknown and one box with a nest was destroyed by vandals. A further nest (great tit) was abandoned after two eggs were laid. The results for the remaining 26 boxes are as follows, with the results for 2001 (the last year in which a full survey was conducted) in brackets.

	blue tit	great tit
nests	14 (21)	11 (7)
fledged young	123 (121)	63 (32)
chick failures	2 (20)	0 (2)

Altogether 186 birds flew from nests this year, an increase of 33 on 2001. 2003 was apparently a disastrous year for blue and great tits and, with the heavy rain we had in May, I feared this year would be similar. However, there were lots of caterpillars about at the critical time. The parent birds seemed to be brooding much more often than usual and so I could not do a full egg count. Some recorders lift the bird off in order to count the eggs, but I am not in favour of this practice because I believe it causes stress. This season, as far as the Commons are concerned, can be counted a success.

On 26 July, between 3.40 am and 4.50 am I monitored bat activity at Prickend Pond as part of the National Bat Monitoring Programme's "Sunrise Survey". I suspected there might be a roost in the large black poplar near the pond, but although there were up to five bats around the tree, I did not see them swarming and so I think the roost must be elsewhere. Most of the bats were common pipistrelles, but I did identify one *Nathusius' pipistrelle*, which until recently was regarded as a migrant, but now there is evidence of its presence all year.

Towards £100,000

Early responses to our most recent appeal have brought cash donations totalling £1,500 and 26 new standing orders. Our regular income from local residents — the Friends of the Commons — taking gift aid reclaimable tax into account, comes to £35,000 a year.

Our staff comprises a part-time clerk and one full-time keeper and so our operation can certainly be described as lean, but if, despite the invaluable additional help provided by our volunteer workers, we are not to see the Commons deteriorate, we need an income of £100,000, so that we have the realistic option of employing a second keeper. With £40,000 coming from Bromley Council, we need to raise £60,000 by our own efforts. Varying amounts, for specific undertakings, come from the Forestry Commission and the Department for the Environment's Countryside Stewardship Scheme, but they amount to no more than about £2,000 a year. That still leaves us with a mountain to climb with the generous support of the growing band of Friends of the Commons.

At one time, back in the 1960s, six keepers were employed. The most obvious consequence of the gradual reduction in our staff is the dense holly, sycamore and bramble scrub which hides many of our majestic trees, chokes what would otherwise be a rich and varied undergrowth and darkens many of the footpaths.

The minimal routine management tasks we need to carry out are

- keeping the footpaths, bridleways and pavements clear of encroaching scrub;
- mowing the amenity grasslands and cutting and raking the conserved acid grasslands, and
- the relentless job of clearing litter and fly-tipped rubbish.

The Conservators would be failing in their duty if they did not also have a reasonable reserve for legal expenses, knowing from bitter experience how costly it can be to defend or prosecute claims (for example, in resisting encroachments and removing travellers). Furthermore, we need to be able to invest in machinery in order to increase the productivity of our Keeper and volunteers. And we need to be in a position to employ contractors in order to carry out major works, such as the recent scrub clearance near the big glade on Chislehurst Common.

The response to our appeals from local residents has been very heartening. Unfortunately, with a few honourable exceptions, the same cannot be said for our approaches to local businesses. But we have not given up; our fund-raising committee is busy preparing a fresh appeal to the shops, offices, pubs and restaurants which enjoy the advantages of the semi-rural setting provided by the Commons.

Commons Management Plan, 2004-2014

At its May meeting the Board of Conservators adopted a new Management Plan for the coming ten years. On the strength of it, our government-sponsored Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) agreement has been renewed and extended. It will bring us an income of at least £10,000 over the next 10 years.

Of course, the money has to be earned. We have to continue looking after the acid grasslands at the Rambler's Rest, the Cockpit area and the large glade on Centre Common. We have to carry on with our diligent care of the heather area on St Paul's Cray Common, weeding, pruning and re-seeding it annually. The wetlands on Centre Common, just down from the large glade, have to be maintained and our scrub clearance programme has to continue. In addition to the above income, the agreement allows us to claim the full cost of our planned extension of the St Paul's Cray Common heathland, which will entail bringing in contractors for tree-felling and scraping off the peat layer, following which our own labour will seed the area and maintain it.

The hot weather during July led to the appearance of a brown algal bloom in Rush Pond. It did no great harm, although it looked rather alarming. The heat led to oxygen depletion in Prickend Pond and some fish deaths. The Environment Agency's Fisheries Team was called in and they removed 600 rudd, taking them to a new home in Danson Park lake. They also netted an American channel catfish, which a local resident must have bequeathed us. Said fish has gone to the Agency's laboratories in Cambridgeshire, while a suitable loving home is sought.. A sign is due to go up at Prickend Pond, with the plea: **DO NOT FEED THE RATS**. It will explain that there is ample natural food for all the birds and that excess bread simply rots in the water, worsening the de-oxygenation problem and encouraging a burgeoning rat population.

Could there be a long term solution to the problem of oxygen depletion in hot weather? Well, if we were to install a fountain in Prickend Pond, it would create enough disturbance to aerate the water. It could be turned on only when needed. What do you think about that?

Other projects in our Management Plan can be added to the CSS agreement and we will receive grant support. For example, we plan to establish reed-beds on the in-flows into Rush Pond and Prickend Pond. As well as adding to the attractiveness of the ponds, the reed-beds will reduce the pollutant and nutrient content of the water, which flows in from the storm drains of surrounding roads.

The Management Plan includes sections on the history, geology and archaeology of the Commons, as well as species lists and the year-by-year programme of work. Copies of the Plan can be bought from our office at the Old Fire Station. With 65 pages, colour pictures and maps, copies cost £25 each. This is a high price, because it has such a small print-run. The Plan has been placed in the reference section at Chislehurst Library and the Local Studies section at Bromley Central Library.

COMMONS GREETINGS CARDS

Here are two examples of the set of 8 full-colour greetings cards which are being sold in aid of our funds. They measure 15 cm x 10 cm. The inside is blank. With envelopes, the set costs £4. Available from the Commons office. Call at the office or just send a cheque (made out to *Chislehurst & St Paul's Cray Commons Conservators*) and they will be sent to you.



Chislehurst



Chislehurst

No need to go to the gym. Work up a good sweat with the Commons Volunteers.

One team meets every Wednesday morning and the other meets on the first Saturday of each month.

All equipment is provided and we set about path-clearing, holly-bashing, grass-raking, scrub-clearing, heather-tending, litter-picking and, once trained in using power-tools, strimming and trimming.

Just contact the Old Fire Station office: 0208 467 1886.

A DESPATCH FROM YOUR INTREPID LITTER CORRESPONDENT, IN ACTION SOMEWHERE ON THE FRONT LINE.

I am in my roof-top eyrie overlooking the High Street car park. In drives a man, young boy seated alongside. The 4-W-D stops. I watch. Suspect winds down window. I watch. Suspect lifts dashboard ashtray. Not fast enough, sucker. In a nano-second I am transformed into Superman. Swooping down, faster than a bullet, I cup my hands to catch the trash before it hits the tarmac. I drop it back through the open window into his lap. One pole-axed stout party. Another day, another case, another win. But there is no end to the relentless battle to keep the city clean. The son will learn from the father. Hence this poem by Rudyard Kipling.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are chickening out and saying that you done it,
If you can make a mess though others shun it
And show them all you do not give a damn,
If bottles that you throw will always smash
And plastic ones are never ever binned,
But left around to decorate the trash,
Then you, my son, can be proud that you have sinned.

If you can learn to smoke, your scope is broader,
With butts and packets, wrappers you can scatter,
A smoker's gift for litter's made to order
And complaints from others really do not matter.

And now we come to tags which you can spray on
Walls and doors and trees and signs and bus stops
And properties of people you can prey on.
A champion sprayer always beats the cops.

In short, the challenge is to leave your mark, son.
So they will know that you have been around,
So tip it, dump it, chuck with gay abandon,
Leave not a vacant space upon the ground.

Litter the pristine spots and never bin it,
Desecrate every inch beneath the sun.
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
So spoil it all and then you'll be a man, my son!