

Final Thoughts

By Mike Enfield, Superintendent

After almost exactly 17 years with the City of London, I am moving on to pastures, and other habitats, new.

During those years, there have been a number of significant changes on the Commons and the way the City's staff manage them. All four Coulsdon Commons have extensive areas grazed by cattle, sheep or deer. It may be coincidence or may be not, but numbers of wild deer, mostly roe, have increased greatly along with the reintroduction of livestock grazing, and deer may often be seen early or late in the areas grazed by sheep or cattle. Rabbits have recovered too in the Farthing Downs & New Hill area, contributing to much shorter swards where they live. Together, all of this grazing has led to a recovery in the populations of some of our rarer wildflowers and insects that thrive in open grassland. It is especially pleasing to see the change in the public's response to grazing. After understandable early concerns about bringing sheep and cattle back on to the commons, it is fair to say that they are now seen almost universally as a natural part of the landscape. Many people bring their children to see the animals, especially at lambing time, and regular walkers take a keen and caring interest in their welfare, alerting the Keepers of any problems they come across.



Key to all of this has been a revolution in the way we the staff communicate and interact with site users. All sorts of public events, slide shows, and a whole range of informative leaflets ensure that we keep in touch with the people who visit or live near the open spaces. Most recently, the public appeals to raise funds for new land, and the formation of volunteer and Friends' groups and a Consultative Committee are the culmination of the change in the way we work. Best of all, every member of staff takes part in this close involvement with the public – which is as it should be, because the open spaces were set up, from 1883 onwards, specifically to provide natural green spaces for the recreation and enjoyment of the public.

Which brings me to my final thought. One of the best things about working for the City of London is its long-term thinking and ongoing support that allows the development of best management practices, such as traditional livestock grazing, on its open spaces. Having been committed to the West Wickham & Coulsdon Commons for well over 100 years already, it is a pretty safe bet, even in this rapidly-changing world, that the City will still be looking after them in another 100 years – perhaps even, as the 1878 Open Spaces Act requires, *in perpetuity*.

What next? - In the short term, following Mike's departure, Bob Warnock, Superintendent of Ashted Common, will take over responsibility for the West Wickham & Coulsdon Commons, to ensure that the Keepers' work continues as normal and to provide continuity. By the time of the next Newsletter, more permanent arrangements should be in place. To keep up to date, log on to the Open Spaces website at www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/openspaces

Also off to pastures new... Simon Meek has moved to the Isle of Man to try his hand at pig farming; Steve Bound is now working as a Reserves Manager for the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust, looking after 46 of their nature reserves; and our Office Manager, John Hunter has retired to Bideford, North Devon. We wish them all well in their new endeavours.

Common Knowledge

Famet grazing - The Famet grazing area on Riddlesdown (adjacent to the old Gardner's Pleasure Resort on the A22) is currently grazed with sheep in three separate electric fenced paddocks. This is time consuming to put up, dismantle and move as well as preventing public access within the area. This winter we plan to erect post and wire fencing through part of the scrub woodland enabling us to amalgamate all three grazing areas while still allowing full public access at all times. Volunteers will be clearing a route in the winter for contractors to erect the fence sometime in April ready for spring grazing in 2007.

Dog Control - We do not write this article lightly, because we know very well the pleasure dogs give to so many people. Indeed a majority of the Commons' staff have one or more dogs at home, including Pup who is 'on the payroll' as a working sheep dog. Sadly, dogs can also, in some circumstances, bring distress to people. For example, runners or hikers who enjoy using the open spaces without a dog as a companion rarely enjoy having a dog jump up at them, no matter how friendly the intention, so owners should ensure that their pets do not cause annoyance to other people.

More seriously, a few, a small minority, of dogs chase deer or the sheep we have grazing on some parts of the Commons. What starts as a game can quickly turn to a serious hunt as the dog's natural, though usually hidden, instincts kick in. We have found deer, and even a sheep from time to time, with life-threatening injuries inflicted by the teeth of people's pets. We know that very often, the owner of a dog that has attacked another animal is as horrified as anybody about the suffering caused to the victim, and had no idea that their family pet could do such a thing. The lesson is – if you have any doubt at all about what your dog will do near sheep – keep it on a lead until you are well away from them, or out of the field.

Six of the Best - On 3rd August five members of the team attended the Green Flag Awards, at the International Conference Centre in Birmingham. The City of London received a total of fourteen Green Flags, with six of those being awarded to the West Wickham & Coulsdon Commons. The flags are awarded to those open spaces that meet the required standard across a range of criteria. The fact that they will be flying for another year over all our sites, is not only down to the work put in by the staff here, but also the army of unpaid volunteers who work with us.



Volunteers proudly display two of the Green Flags

A Million Voices - The City of London is participating in the 'Million Voices' campaign which aims to show public satisfaction towards the country's parks and open spaces through the new GreenSTAT online system. By logging on to www.GreenSTAT.org.uk you can fill in a simple questionnaire about any of the West Wickham & Coulsdon Commons. The information you submit will help to ensure that our open spaces are managed as effectively as possible to provide the services that best meet the needs of the local community. GreenSTAT is administered by 'GreenSpace', a national charity dedicated to promoting better planning, design, management and use of the UK's public parks. Your name, address and the other contact details will not be passed on to us without your specific authorisation.

The 2006 Countryside and Community Fun Day on Kenley Common

By Shaun Waddell

On a blisteringly hot Sunday in early July, an estimated 2,500 local people came onto Main Common, to be part of this year's Countryside Day. The event was even bigger than normal as for this year it was combined with a community Fun Day aimed at all the young families in the area.

The crowd gained close-up experience of many country crafts – hurdle making, basket weaving, walking stick making, charcoaling, wood turning- whilst witnessing demonstrations of a working mobile saw mill (the timber from which was converted by the City of London's own volunteer force into bird box kits that the children were able to build there and then!), falconry and, the *piece de resistance*, 6 spectacular working horses from the north-Kent based Working Horse Trust. As well as horse and cart rides, the children had a chance to ride on a horse and carriage, supplied by Kenley's neighbours at Sunny Croft Farm.



Everyone had fun on Kenley.

We were fortunate to welcome Barratt homes as sponsors of the Community Fun Day. A new group consisting of local people was formed to organise this part of the show and it is seen that the Fun Day will become a regular annual event on the common. Children participated in traditional races (egg and spoon, three legged, football dribbling) as well as activities such as beat the goalie, tree climbing, face painting and a have-a-go arts and crafts tent.

Meeting the heavy horses.



A letter of thank you from Sunny Croft Farm...

May I take this opportunity to thank the City of London team for a chance to use the Kenley Common Countryside and Fun Day to raise money for Leukaemia Research.

All money raised for this charity is vital for keeping the research programme ongoing. The sum raised was £225.00.

For the visiting children to ride on a horse drawn carriage was a chance for them to step back in time, but for Leukaemia Research it will be a chance to move forward in time.

Thank you all for a very rewarding day.

Yours faithfully

Cliff Bennett. Sunny Croft Farm, Kenley.



The horse drawn carriage from Sunny Croft Farm.

Alien Invasion

The Harlequin Ladybird by Roger Hawkins

In recent years a ladybird, originally imported from the Far East to control aphids, has increased its numbers to become almost a plague in parts of North America. This is



Harlequin Ladybird. (Photo supplied by David Element)

Harmonia axyridis, now known as the Harlequin Ladybird. It becomes a nuisance by entering houses in large numbers to pass the winter, and then giving off a yellow-staining liquid when disturbed. Furthermore, the populations of native ladybirds have plummeted as those of the Harlequin have grown. In Europe, the species has been used for pest control in greenhouses, particularly in the Low Countries where it has escaped into the wild. It was first found in Britain in 2004 and has already become the dominant species in parts of London, Essex and Derby. It has now reached West Wickham Common, with a few adults and larvae found on nettles on 20th June 2006.

The Harlequin is a large round ladybird, at least as big as a Seven-spot. Its pronotum (visible part of thorax) is usually white with a central M-shaped black mark. The wing-cases may be yellow, orange or red, depending on the age of the insect. Most specimens have nineteen spots, arranged in rows of 2-3-3-1 on each wing-case, with a narrow central spot at the front. These spots may be small, to a point of disappearing altogether, or large, sometimes even merging to give a black ladybird with red spots, but even in these melanic forms the pronotum retains its white edges. The ladybirds fly readily and can easily colonise new areas. The Harlequin may now to appear on all the commons in ever-increasing numbers.

Harlequin Facts & Figures:

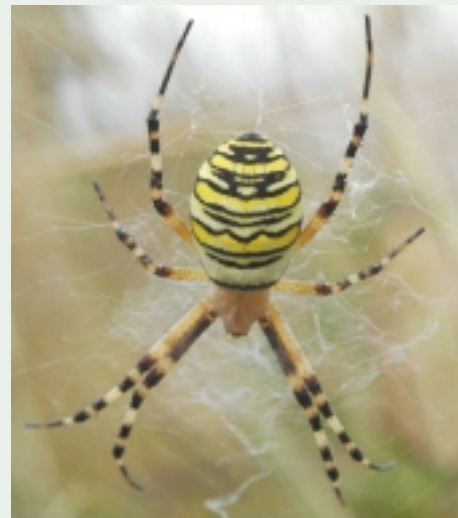
Life cycle - Like all ladybirds, the Harlequin Ladybird undergoes complete metamorphosis and as such has an egg, larval, pupal and adult stage. Pre-adult development takes 14 to 20 days at 25°C and adults can begin to lay eggs after 5 days. A single female can lay over a thousand eggs.

Feeding - Harlequin Ladybirds feed most commonly on aphids, but have a wide food range, also feeding on scale insects, adelgids, the eggs and larvae of butterflies and moths, many other small insects, including other ladybirds, pollen, nectar, and sugary fluids, including honeydew and the juice from ripe fruits.

Wasp Spiders - by Barry Gutteridge

At Spring Park, another foreign species has been discovered this summer. The Wasp Spider is usually found in the Mediterranean but has been gradually spreading and in recent years has been recorded as far north as Sweden.

Until the 1970s it lived on a few sites on the south coast of England. Since then it has slowly moved inland, possibly as a result of climate change: to breed it requires hot summers and a mild winter. In August 2006 more than a dozen female Wasp Spiders were seen on webs near the pond at Spring Park. It was also recorded on land adjoining Riddlesdown. The good news is that, amongst other things, Wasp Spiders are known to eat Harlequin Ladybirds!



Wasp Spider.

Volunteering matters

In this issue we say thank you to a small but dedicated bunch who have achieved so much as volunteers for the City of London.

Jenny Woodhams from our "Monday group", working across the area of Riddlesdown, and Steve Stephens and Frank Hamilton from the "Downsfolk", our group working two Fridays a month on Kenley Common and Riddlesdown, have all now helped out on the Commons for over ten years each. It is impossible to know exactly how many hours that amounts to, but it is in excess of 5,000 – or a whole working year per person! Well done to you all and thank you!

Another recent achievement from the volunteer network is the recruitment of our fiftieth willing helper to the ranks. This can only grow too as we are soon to launch our fifth conservation volunteer group for the Commons - one to help Keepers Jo Osmond and Andrew Scott on Coulsdon Common. (see article on Page 8).



Jenny does some careful pruning.

Anyone wishing to join our teams as a volunteer, or who knows of a family member or friend who might have some spare time to help, is asked to phone Shaun on **0208 660 8533** to find out more.



Frank & Steve making a notice board.

Farthing Downs was host to a large gathering of people in July answering the call to help control the amount of poisonous ragwort that covers the site in the summer months. Organised by local charity Croydon Commitments, 30 workers from the Home Office and local company Mondial Assistance UK Ltd joined 45 pupils from Trinity School, Shirley, lined up to sweep the Downs, pulling up this tall bright yellow flower as they went. With further help later from a specialist conservation company, it meant the hillside had one complete clearance.

A goal for all our volunteer groups is to work as environmentally sustainable as possible. One example of this recently has been the project that the West Wickham and Spring Park group (the WWaSPs) has achieved. Rather than buying in chestnut fencing material from Sussex or Kent, they have taken chestnut coppiced from Spring Park woods and cleft it themselves, working it up into mortised, post and rail fencing – also known as Sussex or ranch fencing. It has been put up along the boundary of the woods replacing a line that has rotted and collapsed - yards from where the chestnut grew.

It is far from all work and no play. The Keeper team invited all volunteers to the now well-established annual barbecue at the City of London Merlewood offices, and over 35 people tucked into locally reared meat, cooked on charcoal made at the Kenley Common Countryside Day in July by BTCV.

A big thank you to the fifteen volunteers who helped at the Countryside Day in July, and another heartfelt thank you to all the volunteers who help us in all sorts of ways out on the commons.

Excavations & Survey on Farthing Downs 2006

By Barry Taylor, English Heritage

This summer saw the second season of archaeological excavations on Farthing Downs, part of our ongoing project studying the history of human activity here.



Excavation of Iron Age pit.
(Photo supplied by Barry Taylor)

There are two visible phases of archaeology. The first phase consists of the earthworks of a later prehistoric enclosure system and track way. These probably enclosed the fields, houses and out-buildings of one or more small farms. In the second phase earthworks were constructed centuries after the farms were abandoned, when the Downs were used as a burial ground by local Anglo-Saxon communities who buried important members of their societies beneath large burial mounds or barrows. Two distinct cemeteries are visible, one in the north and one in the middle of the site, and at least two isolated barrows lie further to the south.

This summer's excavations focused on the northern area with the aim of telling us more about the later prehistoric enclosures and, in particular, the dates that they were constructed. We excavated two large trenches across the earthworks and recovered fragments of pottery that we will use to date these features. Although these artefacts are undergoing analysis they appear to date to the later Iron Age, around 200BC.

We also excavated a number of trenches over features that we had identified using geophysical survey techniques earlier in the year. One of these turned out to be a large pit that was probably used to store grain. This also contained several pieces of pottery that appear to be later Iron Age. In a separate area we found several pieces of Samian ware, a high quality Roman pottery type that was imported from factories in Gaul, the Roman province that covers what is now France. This, along with other Roman artefacts found during excavations in the 1940's, suggests that people continued to live and farm on Farthing Downs in the centuries following the Roman invasion of 43AD.

Although the excavations have finished for the year we will return in the autumn and winter to carry out more geophysical surveys within the enclosures. In the meantime, our aim is to compile all of the work completed so far, including the results of this year's excavations, so they are ready for publication by the end of the year.

An amateur's view

By Pauline Payne, Friends of Farthing Downs

It was a real privilege to be invited, along with members of other local societies, to join with the professionals for this summer's survey. When resting from work on larger trenches we worked on a series of test trenches, set at regular intervals across the north side of the Downs, to validate the findings of geophysical surveys carried out in the spring. Two of these small trenches, measuring a metre square, revealed the track of a small gully, possibly to support fencing round enclosures, perhaps for a living area or a paddock for animals. It was hard work with a steep learning curve for beginners but was a very enjoyable and fascinating two weeks. However, discovering archaeological features and identifying small fragments of Iron Age pottery gave one the impetus to uncover and investigate yet more trenches. Speaking for myself, I will be delighted to volunteer again next year.

Why do we ... manage heathland?

By Andrew Scott

What is it? - Heathland is an attractive open habitat dominated by low growing woody shrubs – the commonest and most characteristic being heather. Its clusters of small flowers when massed together create a purple haze – the key colour saying "**heathland**". With heather, you often get bell heather (in drier places) and cross-leaved heath (in wetter places) both with pinkish purple flowers. Another characteristic shrub of heathland is gorse. With these dwarf shrubs are typically found a number of flowers and fine grasses. Some of these are also found in acid grassland – plants like tormentil and heath bedstraw. Heathland is an important habitat for reptiles like common lizard, slow worm and grass snake as well as adder (found on Hayes Common next to West Wickham Common) as it suits their needs for basking, hunting and hibernation. Invertebrates, especially bees, ants and wasps find the light soil ideal for digging their burrows in the patches of bare ground which frequently occur in heathland. Some which are scarce elsewhere are found in this habitat. Birds such as linnet breed and find food here.

How does it form? - Heathland exists on "hungry" acidic soils – soils whose nutrients are depleted and whose pH is the opposite of that found on alkaline chalk downs. Typically these might be sandy or gravelly soils – like the Blackheath Pebble Beds on West Wickham Common. Prehistoric people probably grew crops on these areas until the soil became exhausted and unsuitable for cultivation. So instead they grazed their animals and harvested products they needed, such as heather for thatching, gorse for fuel, encroaching bracken for animal bedding and bushes and trees for fuel, building materials, fencing and tools. This way of using or managing the land continued for hundreds of years. It's what maintained the heathland as heathland and kept it open.



Heather flowering on Coulsdon Common.

Why is it important? - If heathland's lost you lose the plants and animals which make it what it is. This is especially catastrophic for those rarities which aren't found in other habitats and for those that have declined elsewhere. Heathland is one of Britain's Priority Habitats for conservation.

What threatens heathland now? - When heathland management stops (i.e. grazing or cutting of heath vegetation), bushes and trees step in. Beneath dense bushes and trees, dwarf shrubs such as heather are shaded out and warmth loving invertebrates become extinct – as they cannot stand the cooler environmental conditions. In time, the very soil itself changes as it becomes nutrient rich from the "rain" of leaf litter. This in turn favours the growth of bramble, bracken and coarse grasses which are far more vigorous than the weaker growing flowering plants characteristic of heathland. This is what's caused the decline of heathland on West Wickham Common (WWC) and Coulsdon Common (CC) where it used to be extensive 150 years ago.

What's the situation on WWC and CC today? - Only tiny fragments of "heathland" with scattered heather plants remain. We've even lost bell heather and cross-leaved heath. But there is cause for optimism as seed can survive buried in the soil for many years. So we clear small areas and scrape off the smothering mat of thick leaf litter to expose the mineral soil containing, we hope, seed from plants that once flourished here. Bracken, bramble, coarse grasses, bushes and trees must then be controlled to prevent them overwhelming fragile new growth. It's early days for heathland restoration on the Commons. We hope to gradually increase the amount of heather by enlarging existing glades and linking them up with new ones. We use machines and volunteers to help us in this work. The value of heathland for wildlife and people is being promoted now by the London Heathland Heritage Project. They are helping to raise awareness of how important heathland is and by raising funds to ensure work gets done to protect and maintain it.

The West Wickham & Coulsdon Commons are managed to a high standard for the recreation and enjoyment of the public. In recognition of this each of the six sites proudly flies a Green Flag - an independently judged award given annually to the best parks and green spaces in England and Wales.



To find out more about the City of London and its open spaces go to www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/openspaces From the website you can download colourful site leaflets, watch videos, read the Management Plan and find out about our self-guided circular walks. The 'What's New' section is updated every month so there is always something fresh to read about!

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Steve Wise
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Gary Aldridge
Steve Bruce
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Farthing Downs & New Hill

Wardens

Dominic North
Sarah Clifford

Happy Valley (Croydon)
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Countryside Area

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