



Wimbledon and Putney Commons

Annual Conservation Report

2016/17

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Introduction

Wimbledon and Putney Commons comprise some 1140 acres spread across Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath with Putney Lower Common separated by about one and a half miles.

The Commons consist of a variety of habitats including ponds, woodland, scrubland, heathland and mown recreation areas. They are the home to a wide variety of bird, animal and plant life and are recognised as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for the heathland, and as a European Special Area Of Conservation (SAC) as it is a stronghold for Stag Beetles.

Being an unfenced Common the whole area is open to the public 24 hours a day throughout the year.

The Commons are managed by a Chief Executive and his 20 staff and their duties range from patrolling the Commons to ensure visitor safety, managing the 48 acres of playing fields and carrying out maintenance and conservation work.

Historically, many of the habitats would have been managed by grazing animals and the management regime here on the Commons very much mimics the effect of these animals.

This report provides a description of the conservation work that has been carried out on Wimbledon and Putney Commons over the last year and it's aim is to provide details of the achievements that have been made during this period, to raise awareness of current issues and to inform the reader of future planned actions.



Wimbledon and Putney Commons

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Summary

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Annual Conservation Report 2016/17

Introduction

Forming part of a wider Annual Report for Wimbledon and Putney Commons, the Annual Conservation Report will provide a description of the conservation work that has been carried out on the Commons from April 2016 to April 2017.

While this provides a slight change from previous years where reports have always followed the calendar year, the aim of the 2016/2017 Annual Conservation Report remains exactly the same which is to provide details of the achievements that have been made during the previous twelve month period, to raise awareness of current issues and to inform the reader of planned future actions.

Over the past year, the management of the Commons' natural habitats has been explored through the provision of Commons' first NVC survey and also through the Commons' planned involvement in the government's new CS agreement. With the NVC completed and the Commons' CS applications progressing well, reference to these important pieces of work will be used through this report to help identify how the management of the Commons' natural open spaces will progress over the next few years.

In addition to matters of conservation and wildlife, this report will also make reference to the activities carried out by volunteers on the Commons as well as to some of the other public engagement activities that help to maintain and promote the Commons throughout the year.



Volunteers clearing scrub from the heathland during April 2016

Heathland:

Since November 2006, the heathland on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath has been managed under the prescriptions of a HLS agreement. Undertaking work such as scrub removal, heather and gorse cutting, bracken control and the creation of bare ground sites, the aim of the Commons' involvement with HLS has been to raise the quality of the Commons' remaining areas of heathland and acid grassland to a favourable condition.

Through the activities of WPCC staff and volunteers, it is clear that much has been achieved over the ten years that the Common's HLS agreement has been in effect. In line with the operational objectives set out in the Commons Heathland Management Plan (2006-2016), there has certainly been no loss of heathland, removal of invasive trees and scrub has been carried out, a mosaic of age and structure for heather and gorse has been achieved, pernicious weeds have been kept under control and many areas of the Commons' heathland and acid grassland are now much improved from the condition they were in 10 years ago.



Over the past ten years volunteers and staff have been involved in the removal of invasive scrub from large areas of the Commons' heathland.

Between mid-March and September 2016, ecological consultants, Penny Anderson Associates Ltd, carried out the Commons very first comprehensive NVC survey, the overall objective of which was to make a record of the Commons' vegetation habitats in order to inform current management and to provide a baseline against which to measure change in the future. While the NVC survey does not constitute a management plan in itself, the observations and recommendations that have emerged from this study will prove extremely useful in any future management discussions that take place.

With regards to the management work that has been carried out on the heathland during the lifetime of the Commons' HLS agreement, the NVC study has summarised that while *'it was clear that heathland management has been going on over a considerable timeframe, there is still a considerable amount of work needed to maintain the open area of the heathland currently found on the Commons.'*

At an operational level, over the past twelve months, the Commons' Maintenance Team and volunteers have continued to remove invasive scrub and trees from many areas of the heathland. As part of the Common's winter work programme, the largest areas of heathland that required the removal of trees included areas near Centre Path, Jubilee Path and Inner Park Ride.



Throughout 2016 and the beginning of 2017, volunteers have remained an integral part of the overall management of the Commons' heathland and other open sites.

Having followed the prescriptions of our HLS agreement since 2006, the future management of the Commons' heathland and grassland areas under the new CS agreement should be seen as a natural continuation of all of the hard work that has been carried out in these areas over the last ten years. It should however be noted that as the Commons woodland is currently managed under the FCs EWGS, entry into NEs CS agreement will include all non-woodland areas while the future of the Commons' woodland will fall under a separate FC, CS agreement that will be looked at later in this report.

With many similarities to the Commons' former HLS agreement, CS basically provides the financial incentives for land managers to look after their environment. As a result of the Commons' status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), the management of the Commons' non wooded areas and especially its important heathland and acid grassland sites, will fall under the Higher Tier element of the CS suite of agreements as this covers the management requirements for the country's most environmentally significant sites. Forming a five year agreement, the aim of NE's CS Higher Tier agreement is to ensure that work involving the historic environment, landscape character, educational access and habitat restoration and creation are all carried out.

According to Natural England's CS Negotiation Schedule, the aim of the management of Lowland Heath is '*to provide a mosaic of vegetation which allows all heathland features to flourish, including pioneer heath and bare ground which benefits rarer invertebrates, birds, reptiles and plants*'.

At an operational level, this work will include:

- The control and management of birch, oak and other scrub species by cutting and stump treatment.
- Rotational cutting (or grazing) to maintain a varied heathland vegetation structure.
- The creation of bare ground sites through the scraping back of turves.
- The maintenance of a full range of age classes of gorse by cutting and removing arisings.
- The management of dense bracken stands and deep bracken litter layers by rotational cutting, bruising or spraying.

The Plain:

Managed under the prescriptions of the current HLS agreement, The Plain is the Commons' largest remaining area of acid grassland. With an overall area of 11.7 hectares, between 1st March and 31st July, 9.7 hectares of this site are designated as a Skylark Protection Area where visitors are asked to keep dogs on lead, keep to mown paths and to not to fly kites near the restricted area.

Possibly as a result of the cold and wet weather that affected the Commons during spring and the beginning of summer 2016, Skylarks did not successfully nest on The Plain last year. Monitoring of The Plain by members of the Commons' Wildlife and Conservation Forum between March and September/October did however continue to improve our knowledge of the flora and fauna that can be in this area of the Commons. For a full account of the monitoring work that has been carried out on The Plain and its surrounding habitats, please refer to Dr Ros Taylor's report, *'Ecological Monitoring at Wimbledon and Putney Commons, spring-summer 2016.'*



Between 1st March and 31st July, approximately 30 public notices are positioned around the area of The Plain known as the Skylark Protection Area.

As part of the NVC's management assessment of the Commons grassland sites, The Plain is recognised as '*an important recreational and educational area of grassland/heathland mosaic on the Commons*'.

To help enhance and protect this site, management of The Plain over the past twelve months has included the removal of two clumps of trees along the eastern edge of The Plain, control of invasive saplings and pernicious weeds, stump grinding and the annual summer cut where vegetation is baled and removed by contractors from the site.



During March 2017, a powerful stump grinding machine was used on The Plain to ensure the safety of future grass cutting operations on this site.

As with the Commons heathland, the future management of The Plain will also fall under the prescriptions of NE's CS agreement. As part of the Commons' application for CS, in August 2016, soil samples were taken from 13 areas of grassland on Wimbledon and Putney Commons. With a total of 325 samples taken, these were then taken for analysis by NE to discover exactly which areas of grassland on the Commons would be eligible for inclusion in the CS scheme. Unfortunately, as confirmed in the Commons' NVC study, overall, the majority of the Commons grasslands are species poor, and as such, most of the 13 grassland sites that were measured were found to be extremely high in nutrients.

Through correspondence with NE, it has been recommended that in order to bring a number of the Commons' currently degraded areas of grassland into an improved condition, it would be beneficial to carry out an annual programme of 'cut and collect' where the removal of vegetation would help to reduce excess nutrients.

Perhaps as a result of the successful management that has been carried out on The Plain during its inclusion in the Commons' HLS agreement, out of all of the areas where soil samples were taken, the results taken from The Plain were most favourable. Through correspondence in August 2016 with NE's Officer responsible for Commons CS application, Josie Allen, her views on The Plain were that the current management for this area is working well and the grassland on The Plain looks to have greatly improved since the start of the HLS. As a result, the future management of The Plain under CS will continue with an annual cut and clearance of vegetation and much of the same management techniques that we have carried out on this area as part of our HLS will continue to apply.



Since 2008, management of The Plain has included a summer cut where vegetation is cut, baled and removed from the site.

Through evidence from NE's soil sampling and through the work completed for the Commons' NVC report, a common theme that has emerged from both pieces of work has been the high level of nutrients found on areas of the Commons' grassland and the effects that disturbance may be having on these sites.

With reference to The Plain, while the NVC survey recognised that '*visitors do appear to take note of the signage on The Plain and stay on paths throughout uncut grassland areas*', for the Commons grassland sites in general, high recreational usage, particularly dog walking has been cited as a factor that will add to the nutrient levels of grassland and therefore damage the integrity of these sites. It should however be noted that dogs cannot be entirely blamed for nutrient inputs as air pollution and the subsequent atmospheric nitrogen deposition were also cited in the NVC report as another potential factor that could cause further harm to many of the Commons' most sensitive areas.

While atmospheric pollution is something that needs to be looked at, it would probably be more advantageous for WPCC to focus its resources on addressing the attitudes and behaviour of visitors to the Commons.

With approximately 70 dog waste bins positioned around the Commons, over recent years there has been a notable change in visitor attitudes to picking up after their dogs and therefore changing public culture is possible. So, while addressing the effects of visitor disturbance on the Commons will almost certainly not be without its challenges, if we are to act upon the information raised by NE, volunteer monitoring reports and the NVC survey, it is surely worth engaging further in the discussion now before the damage is too late to reverse.



With approximately 70 dog waste bins positioned around the Commons, action can be taken to successfully manage the impact of visitor disturbance on this site.

Woodland:

Since 2007, approximately 260 hectares of the Commons' woodland have been managed under the FC's EWGS and all woodland management work has been carried out in accordance with the United Kingdom's Woodland Assurance Standard guidelines. Over this period, the most notable woodland work that has been completed has undoubtedly been the thinning of holly from approximately 30 hectares of woodland around the south western area of the Commons.

Alongside this, other woodland operations have included coppicing, maintenance of woodland rides, creation and management of woodland glades, bracken control and drain clearance and maintenance.

As a result of the NVC survey, the majority of the woodland on the Commons has been categorised as oak-bracken-bramble woodland – typical community (*W10a*, *Quercus robur-pteridium aquilinum-Rubus fruticosus*). With a ground flora which is generally species poor and consisting mainly of bramble, bracken and honeysuckle and an understorey which consists mainly of holly, which often shades out all other ground flora, the Commons woodland is, largely speaking, species poor. Where recommendations are made, it has been suggested in the NVC survey that one way to improve the biodiversity of the Commons woodland would be to invest in the creation of glades and other work to open up the canopy of the existing woodland trees.



With significant areas of woodland now thinned of Holly, the NVC's recommendation of creating glades and opening up the tree canopy will be the next logical step forward in the management of the Commons' woodland.

As 2017 will mark the final year of the Commons' involvement with the current EWGS, the way in which the Commons' woodland will be managed over the next five years will be through involvement with the new FC managed CS agreement. Although we are currently only at the application stage of this agreement, the type of agreement that the Commons will enter into will be the Higher Tier agreement which falls under the category WD2, Woodland Improvement.

In terms of the work that will be carried out, this will include operations such as:

- The management of successional scrub through cyclical cutting
- Re-coppicing
- Thinning or selectively felling trees as agreed with an advisor
- The removal of competing, non-native or invasive trees by mechanical or chemical control.
- The creation or management of permanent open space and access rides
- The management of ride edges by cyclical cutting
- The creation or maintenance of appropriate levels of deadwood habitat



During the final year of the Commons involvement with the EWGS, WPCC staff carried out ride-side thinning work and the maintenance of woodland rides and ditches.

Oak Processionary Moth

OPM is a non-native species of moth that was first identified in the United Kingdom (Kew, West London) in 2006. Once established, OPM can cause the defoliation of oak trees and skin contact with the hairs found on the caterpillars can lead to skin rashes and less commonly sore throats, breathing difficulties and irritation to the eyes. Having first been identified on Wimbledon and Putney Commons during 2011, OPM is now widespread across the Commons and during summer 2016, a total of 387 nests were located. This was an increase of 87 nests from 2015.

Since the withdrawal of FC financial assistance at the end of 2014, the sole responsibility for the management of OPM on the Commons has been the duty of the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators. Since this time, Commons' staff have developed an effective system of management for the control of OPM on Wimbledon and Putney Commons that has focused primarily on the two aspects of risk management and communication.

Beginning in May, Oak trees around seven areas of high footfall were treated with two applications of the biological control agent *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt). Consent for the use of Bt on the Commons was provided by NE and out of the total number of 270 trees that were treated during this work, only one tree was subsequently found to be infected with OPM nests. As with the previous year, during 2016, spraying work was then followed up by displaying public notices at strategic locations around the Commons, informing local schools and youth groups about the presence of OPM on the Commons, survey work and finally nest removal.

Following a risk based approach to carrying out OPM nest removal on the Commons, the Maintenance Team were able to remove all of the nests that had been identified as providing an immediate hazard to visitors and during 2016 the Commons' OPM management programme progressed well.

While the Commons' team are all set to manage the problem of OPM during 2017, if the weather is warm during spring and the start of summer, we could be faced with a very different situation from 2016 where a cold and wet start to the spring meant that nest levels remained fairly low.



OPM spraying and one of the 387 OPM nests found on the Commons during 2016

Ponds, Rivers & Streams:

Over the past twelve months, work on the Commons ponds has been largely involved with completion of routine tasks. As in previous years, public notices were displayed around Kingsmere, 7 Post Pond, Bluegate Gravel Pit and Hookhamslade Pond from 1st April to 31st August asking dog walkers to help us protect the breeding waterfowl by keeping their dogs out of the water during the bird nesting period. Also, as in previous years, similar public notices were displayed around Queensmere during the same period but with the additional request that dogs must be kept on lead around the general area of the pond to help further protect the area's nesting waterfowl.

Despite the large number of people and dogs who visit the Commons each day, it could be observed that the level of compliance appeared to remain high during the summer period with the great majority of people observing our requests around the ponds.

Unfortunately, on 21st October 2016, a Mute Swan was killed outside of the restricted time frame by a dog at kingsmere. This was a particularly unfortunate incident as the dead swan was discovered by its numbered tag to have been one of the cygnets that had been ringed at Queensmere by volunteers from the British Trust for Ornithology on 6th July 2009. It should however be noted that while this was a very unfortunate incident, the owner of the dog that was involved in the attack was extremely distressed by what had happened and as a result the dog was re-homed.



Floating platforms on Queensmere are provided with nesting material each year to help protect swans and other waterfowl from the risk of attack.

Moving forward with the management of the Commons' nine ponds, while routine management such as invasive weed control and litter clearance will continue on all affected ponds, the management of the Commons ponds through NE's CS agreement will unfortunately be limited to two ponds which will include Hookhamslade Pond and Ravine Pond. While it had been anticipated that more of the Commons' ponds could have been included within the CS agreement, unfortunately, the option that is currently available as part of the Higher Tier agreement only includes ponds with a surface area of less than 1 hectare which precludes the vast majority of the other ponds on the Common. The option is also only available to ponds that are defined on the FWHT website as ponds with good flora and fauna, good quality water and natural water levels.

Operational work that will form part of this grant option will include things such as the removal of undesirable species, retaining existing submerged or partially submerged deadwood, ensuring that fish are not introduced to the ponds and ensuring that invasive scrub is controlled around the margins of the ponds.

In terms of the wildlife associated with the Commons' ponds, over the past four years, all of the Commons' nine ponds have been routinely checked for frog and toad spawn at the appropriate time of the year. During 2017, it was recorded that frog spawn had appeared in all nine of the ponds and toad spawn had been identified in two of the ponds (Queensmere and Scio Pond). Dragonfly and damselfly sightings were also very positive during 2016 with members of the Wildlife and Conservation Forum reporting 19 different species during the summer. As a result of the wildlife value of two of the Commons ponds in particular, during 2017 both LWT and FWHT have displayed an interest in carrying out survey work around Hookhamslade Pond and Bluegate Gravel Pit.



As a result of its high value to wildlife, Bluegate Gravel Pit has been selected as one of the Commons' ponds that would benefit from further monitoring work.

Putney Lower Common

In addition to the work that has been completed around the Oasis Academy site during the past year, perhaps the most significant piece of work that has been carried out by WPCC staff on Putney Lower Common has been the continuation of woodland thinning operations on two separate areas of the Common. Following on from the work started by the team in 2015, during November 2016, thinning work in the area of woodland between the fairground site and Barnes Common was completed. Subsequent to this, a second area of woodland close to the northern boundary wall of Putney Lower Common Cemetery was also thinned by the Maintenance Team towards the end of 2016 and the result is that sight lines have been improved and wooden boundary posts with contact details for the Ranger's Office have been installed.



Oak posts containing contact details for the Ranger's Office have been positioned along the entire length of the boundary between Putney Lower Common and Barnes Common.

With extremely overgrown vegetation making access to some of Putney Lower Common's woodland possible to only the most determined of individuals, perhaps one of the most positive results of the recent woodland thinning work has been the increasing use of the site by children and various forest schools initiatives.

In terms of the flora and fauna that can be found on Putney Lower Common, apart from the information gathered through the monthly walkovers carried out by the Commons' Conservation and Engagement Officer, the most exciting news over the past twelve months has surrounded the numerous hedgehog sightings that have been made on and around the general area of the Common.

As stated on The People's Trust for Endangered Species website, *"one in three of all British Hedgehogs have been lost since the year 2000, and they continue to decline at a shocking rate."*

Having virtually disappeared from many areas of London, the local interest that has become ignited through the reports of hedgehogs of Putney Lower Common during 2016 culminated in a very well attended public evening talk that was presented by wildlife expert Nigel Reeve on 8th February 2017. To help us protect the hedgehog population on and around Putney Lower Common, Dr Reeve has kindly agreed to provide staff with a training session at some point during 2017 and we have also become a partner in LWT's 'Urban Urchins' project. With the aim of raising awareness about the current status of hedgehogs around the Capital, the Urban Urchins project would like to identify London hotspots where hedgehogs are known to thrive which will then be used to focus community involvement in events designed to help protect the continued survival of hedgehogs within the city's landscape.



Hedgehog photographed by Bill Rowland on Putney Lower Common during 2016.

New Development – Putney Lower Common

As part of the requirements of the Easement entered into with the London Borough of Wandsworth for access rights over the Commons to serve the New Development, there were requirements by the Council to restore and landscape the Commons.

A specialist landscape contractor was appointed on behalf of the Council and WPCC by the developer to undertake the planting and landscaping works. The hoarding surrounding the site was removed in August/September 2016 to permit further landscaping works to be undertaken.

Significant amounts of top soil were imported from an approved source in preparation for the planting and seeding work that took place over the course of the winter. New earth mounds were constructed along the side of the new access-way and these have been planted with native trees and shrubs. The surfacing of the access-way and footpaths with tar and gravel were completed in October.

To assist with the establishment of the new planting areas and wildflower meadows, temporary chestnut pale fencing has been installed.



New wildflower planting as part of the restoration of Putney Lower Common

Public Engagement:

Volunteers:

Over the past twelve months, volunteers have continued to play a vital role in helping to manage the Commons. Following the calendar year, between January 2016 and the end of December 2016, volunteers contributed an estimated 3440 hours to activities involving scrub bashing, litter picking, helping with our programme of healthy walks, helping with the Commons' annual bio-blitz, leading walks, monitoring work and attending various forums. Through their combined efforts, areas such as the heathland have become increasingly well managed with invasive scrub being pushed back in all areas, the problems associated with litter have been reduced and our overall knowledge of the flora and fauna that can be found on the Commons has been dramatically increased.

To help provide our regular volunteers and members of staff with an overview of the work that is carried out on The Commons, since September 2016 a newsletter working under the title of 'Common Ground' has been circulated on a bi-monthly/quarterly basis. Including updates provided by various members of the team, Common Ground hopefully provides an easily digestible and entertaining way of keeping up to date with events on the Commons as well as providing a useful platform from which to promote the many occurrences which make this site so special.



Volunteers enjoying a well-earned hot drink during a Saturday morning scrub bashing session.

Walks and Talks:

To help inform local interest groups about the wide variety of flora and fauna that can be found on the Commons and also to help promote all of the great work that is carried out on the Commons during the year, providing walks and talks and attending various public events and meetings forms an important part of our work. Between April 2016 and April 2017, events included numerous school walks, visits to local society's including the Wimbledon Guild and the local Alzheimer's Society and two public walks that were led by members of the Commons' management team.

The most regular walks that we now provide throughout the year are the fortnightly Health Walks which forms part of the national Walking for Health programme that is supported by the Ramblers Association and Macmillan Cancer support. Taking approximately 1 hour to complete, our programme of health walks are led by a trained member of the WPCC team and while these have been designed to encourage people to lead a more active lifestyle, they have also proved to be a great way of informing another group of local people about what is happening on the Commons. During 2017, our walks have managed to attract up to 15 people to each event and it is hoped that over the next year, this event will continue to go from strength to strength.



Mounted Keepers talking to an assembled audience during one of the Commons' management led walks.