



Common Knowledge

April 2010, Issue 39

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Common Knowledge, the newsletter of the Friends of Streatham Common, is edited by Peter Newmark: tel. 020 8679 2908; email peternewmark@googlemail.com

Friends website:

www.freewebs.com/streathamfriends/

You are cordially invited to

Enter the Friends Cake-Baking competition; come to our Kite Day; join a Bird Walk or Easter Egg Hunt; enjoy an afternoon at Band in the Rockery or Shakespeare in the Rockery.

For a list of these and other Friends events that might interest you, see the back page; for more details, either look out for posters on the

*Common or visit our website -
www.freewebs.com/streathamfriends*

Ice Rink versus Common Land

The agreement between Tesco and Lambeth council that a temporary, enclosed, full-size ice rink should be placed on Streatham Common while a new permanent rink is built as part of the Streatham Hub development is a threat to the Common's future. Lambeth has long promised that there will be an ice rink throughout the development of the Hub. Originally the new rink was to be built on the Hub site before the old rink was demolished. Now Tesco has demanded, and Lambeth has acquiesced, to an off-site interim rink. Lambeth's Cabinet approved the Streatham Common site on 29 March.

The temporary rink and its surrounds, including parking, will occupy about the size of a professional football pitch, probably at the foot of the Common. It will be in place for up to three years before the land is reinstated. We are promised that there will be cast-iron guarantees that Tesco's supermarket will not be able to open until the new permanent ice rink, along with a leisure centre and swimming pool, is open. But there remains a serious risk either that Tesco manage to wriggle out of this commitment or that further economic problems delay the Hub after the temporary structure is in place. The danger then is that 'temporary' becomes permanent. Again, we are assured that the temporary rink would only be present for a fixed period on the Common but how can we be absolutely certain of this?

Planning permission for the temporary rink will need to be obtained and, given the legislation that protects commons, as well as a Parliamentary Act that specifically protects Streatham Common against the erection of buildings, permission will have to be obtained right up to the level of the Secretary of State. We intend to argue that our Common is too precious to allow a large building to be placed on it for at least three years, not to mention all the disruption, removal of trees and closure of footpaths that that would bring.

Water, Water Everywhere

It never ceases to amaze me how the Common can be parched and cracked in the summer but a virtual bog in the winter. This winter seems to have been especially bad. By the end of February, the ground was supersaturated and on a rainy day water poured down paths, gullies and drains, and gathered in makeshift pools wherever it could. Dog walkers slithered across the open areas, their dogs slowly becoming indistinguishable from the mud itself. Footpath users either suffered wet feet or diverted to pavements, only too often to find it hard to avoid the floods and impromptu 'lakes' on the main road at the foot of the Common. Everybody else stayed indoors.

A walk in, or shortly after, heavy rain, has its attractions, however. For a start, the ditch that marks the border between the Common and Norbury Grove, and between Lambeth and Croydon, turns into a stream, which runs from the north east end of the wood to just beyond the tennis court, mostly above ground. In doing so, it nourishes sedges and ferns that grow there. After leaving the Common the stream eventually joins up with Norbury Brook and the waters then flow via the rivers Graveney and Wandle into the Thames. Another sight worth looking out for is the way that heavy rainfall carves streams out of the dead leaves lying on the woodland floor. And, rain-averse though our own species may be, birds seem not much to care. With the ground so soft, members of the thrush family – including blackbirds, song thrushes and redwings, a winter visitor – can pull out worms by the dozen. Presumably foxes do the same at night, as worms are an important part of their diet especially at times when there is less to scavenge from the Common's bins.

Particularly after rain, it is also worth taking a look at the remnants of what drew visi-

tors by the hundreds to the area in the 17th century – the health-giving natural springs that turned Streatham into a fashionable spa. According to a poster of the late 19th century, Streatham's mineral water is "sparkling and bright, and, although it contains much Sulphate of Magnesia, is not unpleasant to the taste" and "has been celebrated for upwards of two centuries for its great efficacy in renovating the impaired functions of Life". Moreover "its aperient property..... is very mild, evacuating irritating matter from the intestines without producing any constitutional disturbance". There are no springs evident on the Common, itself, these days but still a couple just over the border into Norbury Grove, which flow for almost all the year but are swollen after rains. Looking at the water, it is still often clear and I dare say would still evacuate the intestines were one to be foolhardy enough to drink it.

With so much water around in the rainy season, it is a great pity that the Common no longer has any ponds. The two that used to exist are now the paddling pools (one defunct, the other still operating in the summer months) and we are left only with the artificial water cascade and pools in the Rookery (now back in full flow after a scandalous year out of action) to sustain any pond life. Could a pond be recreated one day? There is currently funding for drainage and tree planting to make the bottom of the Common more suitable for sports and pedestrians. How about funding for the top of the Common to capture some of the water flow and create a wetland area for frogs, newts, dragonflies and the like? ♦

Secretary needed

The Friends will be without a secretary from June 2010. If you might be willing to serve as our Secretary, or want more information, please get in touch with the Editor, whose contact details are to be found on the front page

WW2 on the Common

In September 1938 – a whole month before World War 2 started on 3rd September 1939 – trenches for protection from bomb blast were being dug at the bottom of our Common, opposite Greyhound Lane. Later, two brick shelters were built on the site but, as they soon became waterlogged, they were not very popular. There was also a barrage balloon, (to defend against low-flying aircraft) on the Lower Common, opposite Immanuel Church, and Graham Gower of the Streatham Society tells us that there was an anti-aircraft gun on the railway under the bridge in Geneldon Road that would come out, fire, and go back into the tunnel. But in spite of all this preparation an early map shows that in the area from the Rookery to Streatham High Road we had 12 HE (high explosive) bombs, 3 butterfly bombs, one unexploded bomb (opposite Hopton road) and, on 13th July 1944, our one and only V1 flying bomb, which made a mess of the war-time allotments then on the Common.

For the V1 flying bomb (or doodlebug), one cannot do better than quote from the excellent booklet *Streatham's 41*, written by Senior District Recorder (from 1942-1945) Kenneth Newell Bryant. It was origi-



Trenches being dug on Streatham Common in September 1938 in preparation for protection from bomb blast. From London in the Twenties and Thirties From Old Photographs, by James Howgo, Batsford 1978.

Some of the photos showing V1 damage from *Streatham's 41* have recently been made into a musical presentation on YouTube by Councillor Mark Bennett at: [youtube.com/watch?v=elGYvZehO_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elGYvZehO_g)

nally published in 1945 and republished by the Streatham Society in 1988. The 41 refers to the number of flying bombs that fell in Streatham.

The Common bomb was Streatham's 27th and "chose a beautiful summer's evening to dive into the middle of some allotments on Streatham Common. Casualties were light but the surrounding houses were

V1 Flying Bomb



badly blasted, including those of Alderman Carr and Doctor Caley,

Borough Medical Officer of Health. Mrs Caley is Deputy Post Warden of J91, the Post Warden of which (Mr P Ormond-Jones) acted as Incident Officer. The services were on the spot in record time and made a brave show for, instead of being spread, as usual, over several streets, they were parked in one long line. With no less than 25 National Fire Service vehicles reported and with all the other services there must have been a total of nearly 50. Senior Warden Lawman was kept busy controlling this traffic, the bulk of which quickly returned to depot.

One interesting and perhaps symbolical happening was that every growing thing in the allotments round the crater was cut off close to the ground (clean-shaven would best describe it) but a few weeks later the plants were throwing up fresh green growth. The V1 failed to quell the spirit of even British cabbages; they were determined to answer the call to 'grow more food'."

I might add that our Common was the responsibility of Post J86 Area and the Post Wardens and Deputies were G.F. Byers, J.S. Bell (Incident Officer) and E.G Osborn. The District Warden was W.J. Hagger and the Deputy Wardens were E.J. Tinson and A. Sheppard. It would be nice to make contact with any of their descendants as they could add to our knowledge of wartime Streatham – especially the Common – and they may even have artefacts that we could add to our collection for the proposed Streatham Local History Museum.

Colin Crocker

Mistletoe No More

For many years the Common has had a large bunch of mistletoe on a mature lime tree near to Leigham Court Road. This was the only bunch on the Common, one of the very few in Lambeth and was well documented.

In Lambeth's Biodiversity Action Plan, mistletoe is the only plant to be singled out as worthy of its own Action Plan and the sites of the few mistletoe plants in Lambeth are said to be "a closely guarded secret because of the risks of plants being removed from trees for commercial or personal gain". Part of the Action Plan is "to prevent any loss of mistletoe plants and any reduction in the current population of mistletoe in Lambeth".

Fine words indeed, but this photograph shows the results of lopping the tree, which



Vincent Van Gogh on Streatham Common

Many of you will already know that Vincent Van Gogh, when living in Brixton, sketched a view of Streatham Common, which was on the flyleaf of a book of poems that he sent to his brother, Theo, and has subsequently been lost. In the July 2006 issue of *Common Knowledge*, local historian John Brown wrote about the circumstances of Van Gogh's visit to the Common and the possible display of the sketch in Brixton in the early 1970s.

Thanks to a recently completed project to put all of Van Gogh's letters online, you can now see the full text of the letter that accompanied the book. The text is online translated into English and also in Dutch and French at <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let032/letter.html#translation>. Here is part of the English text: the rest of the letter is about Roche's poems.

London, April 1875

*My dear Theo,
I'm sending you herewith a small drawing. I made it last Sunday, the morning a daughter (13 years old) of my landlady died. It's a view of Streatham Common, a large, grass-covered area with oak trees and broom. It had rained in the night, and the ground was soggy here and there and the young spring grass fresh and green. As you see, it's scribbled on the title page of the 'Poésies d'Edmond Roche'.*

Stop press. While recently repairing the damaged Covington Shelter in the Rookery, a council worker noticed that carved into the wood was "Vincent V G sat here worrying about his left ear, 1st April 1875". This remarkable discovery was made 135 years to the day after Van Gogh left his graffiti for posterity.

was deemed to be dangerous, in March. The mistletoe, which must have taken decades to grow, has gone, even though it could easily have been saved with foresight. Shame on the council for not appropriately instructing the lopers. ♦

Acid Grassland

If 'acid grassland' sounds to you like some kind of 1970s 'drugspeak', you would be wrong. In natural history parlance the term describes grassland that develops over nutrient-poor, acidic soils. Streatham Common has the largest patch of acid grassland in Lambeth and this type of grassland was one of the declared priorities in Lambeth's 2006 Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

If you want to inspect our acid grassland, stand with your back to the Rookery Café, turn half left and walk ahead to the grassy area that is only mown once a year. It is largely because the mowing is only annual and the cuttings are picked up that the soil is nutrient poor. The reason that the soil is acid is because it overlies sand and gravel. (Lower down the Common the sand and gravel are replaced by clay; it is where these two soil types meet that water bubbles to the surface creating the springs for which Streatham was once famous).

Acid grassland has a characteristic range of plants that prefer this type of habitat. Among those found on our patch are



This memorial plaque to the previous Chair of the Friends is now on a bench overlooking Hilly Four Acres.

sheep's sorrel and cocksfoot grass. This patch is also the best place on the Common to find grasshoppers and yellow ants, a favourite food for green woodpeckers.

The area of acid grassland is small but could be larger. In the area above it, up to the disused road, the grass is cut frequently and the cuttings allowed to lie. As a result the soil will have become more nutrient rich and the diversity of plants will have diminished. This could gradually be reversed by changing the mowing regime, but the mown area is used for recreation, including our annual dog show (coming up on 5th September). More attractive is the prospect of extending the acid grassland further downhill, where a woodland has grown up over the past 30 or so years. The wood is still spreading and encroaching on the remaining acid grassland. The Friends feel this should be prevented and even slowly reversed in order to restore a rather larger area of acid grassland, with its special ecological interest.

In passing, we note that among the BAP's objectives were to have a borough-wide conservation programme for invertebrates in acid grasslands by 2008 and to hold events and activities to promote acid grassland, also by 2008. To the best of our knowledge neither has happened ♦

What's Up?

Achieved

- * the water cascade in the Rookery has at last been restored, a year after it stopped;
- * the rose garden in the memorial gardens has finally been reshaped to fit in with the Civilian War Memorial erected in 2006;
- * missing parts of the beech hedge inside the railings around the children's playground have been planted;
- * the large patch of brambles that had overgrown a fallen tree at the top end of the Horse Ride has been cleared;

- * shrub planting has taken place to the right of the path below the Covington shelter in the Rookery;
- * two football pitches have been marked out on the lower Common and a cricket strip should be in place any day now.

Volunteer Day Achievements

- * most of the brambles that were overgrowing one of the few remaining patches of gorse on the Common have been dug up;
- * saplings growing around the edges of the woodland that has been encroaching on the acid grassland have been removed;
- * a number of log piles have been created to encourage insect life and fungi.

Vandalised

- * parts of the Covington shelter in the Rookery were destroyed but have since been repaired;
- * the net in the tennis court was ripped to shreds but has been temporarily replaced by an old, somewhat damaged net;
- * the surface of one of the picnic tables in the 'orchard' area has been badly burnt and will need replacing ♦

Advertisements

Alexander Technique

Local daytime, evening and Saturday sessions available. All enquiries welcome. Try an introductory session for £20 to find out how it might help you.

Call Geraldine Gleeson on 0208 679 6131 or email info@alexandersouth.co.uk. Find out more at www.alexandersouth.co.uk

S.E.A. Plumbing

We are a local firm that can reliably help you with your domestic plumbing needs and with bathroom fitting. If you would like to discuss your needs and to arrange for an estimate, give me a call.

Steve Atkins 07973430295 or email seaplumbing1@aol.com

Events for your diary

April 10th. Spring Bird Walk. Meet at the café at 9.00 am. Ends about 10.30.

April 11th. Kite Day. On the Common. From 11.00 am to 5.00 pm.

May 8th. Bird Box and Song Survey. Meet at the café at 9.30 am. Ends at 11.

May 16th. Cake Baking Competition (as part of Streatham Food Festival). In the café from 1.00 to 3.00 pm.

June 13th. Band in the Rookery. Free event. Music by John Brown and friends. From 3.00 pm to 6.00 pm.

June 16th. Friends of Streatham Common Annual General Meeting. In Sainsbury's Cafe at 7.30 pm.

July 3rd. Top of the Common - Streatham Festival's annual family and music event. From 1.00 to 6.00 pm.

July 10th. The History & Natural History of Streatham Common - a joint walk by the Friends and the Streatham Society. Starts 2.30 pm at the café.

July 11th. Shakespeare in the Rookery. 3.00 pm. *Merchant of Venice* presented by Theatre Set-up.

September 5th. Fun Dog Show. 2.30 pm. Opposite the café.

The Friends would like to say thanks to the Streatham Society for funding the purchase of a giant chess set, to be used at summer events, and to Sainsbury's for providing the mulled wine and mince pies that were enjoyed before our carol concert.