



# Common Knowledge

August 2022, Issue 76

*Inside this issue*

2. Clever Crows; Fencing off the Common
3. Wildflowers on the Common
4. What's Up?

*Common Knowledge*, the newsletter of the Friends of Streatham Common, is edited by Peter Newmark:  
peternewmark@gmail.com

Chair of Friends of Streatham Common:  
chair@streathamcommon.org

Membership queries:  
membership@streathamcommon.org

**WIND DAY**  
**Bring a kite, buy**  
**a kite, fly a kite**

**September 11th**  
**10am to 4pm**  
**On the Common**

## From the Chair

Wow! Hasn't it been a hot one! I have lived nearby for 28 years and I cannot recall seeing the Common looking so brown! We really need some rain, and I hope a good deal comes soon. Meanwhile, it is good to see families enjoying the weather, having picnics, playing games or just soaking up the rays.

It has been a long time coming but the Rookery Café's fencing has finally been replaced. I wasn't sure how it was going to look but I think it is quite attractive and, at the very least, it matches the fencing around the playground, so is in keeping with what we have on the Common already. It makes such a difference and, to my eyes anyway, it is a vast improvement on the old broken wooden fence!

We are expecting to have new rubbish bins installed on the Common in the coming weeks. These will be replacing some of the existing bins but also adding some additional ones. We hope that this will go a long way towards keeping the litter problems in check, with visitors putting their litter in the bins and wildlife prevented from taking it out again.

It has been a few months since the Covid testing centre vacated the car park and yet it has remained closed. The centre caused the car park to sustain some damage and repairs are necessary. At the time of writing, Lambeth Council is still deciding what will become of the car park. As you can imagine, the Friends of Streatham Common are keen to voice an opinion on what this space should be used for, so we are planning to hold a public meeting in October to discuss options with our members. If you have some ideas of what you would like to see in that space, please email me in advance at the following email address [chair@streathamcommon.org](mailto:chair@streathamcommon.org). I hope you will also be able to attend the meeting. We will let you know when a date has been fixed.

Meanwhile, I hope you all enjoy what remains of the summer, although if it doesn't rain soon, we may have to think about having our first Raindance Festival !!

*Tracey Williamson*

## Clever Crows

Without a doubt, the bottom of Streatham Common has become a gathering place for a large number – up to 100 – of crows in the past year. They seem harmless enough, although they are one of the main causes of rubbish being strewn around waste bins overnight. But Zippos Circus would disagree.

Commenting in *My London* while Zippos was on the Common in May, Martin Burton, founder of the circus, claimed that the increased numbers of crows in London's parks had caused £250,000 worth of damage by pecking holes in the Big Top tent and damaging the performers' caravans and TV aerials. In part he blamed the presence of so many crows on their love of the popcorn that gets dropped around the site by circus goers (so don't sell it, some might say).

Crows are among the cleverest and most sociable of birds. They are also among the most liked birds by some people and most disliked by others.

You will not find many fans of crows among the wardens of wildlife reserves. They are disliked as one of the main killers of young birds and animals - gulls and foxes are as bad. Here too, the increase in numbers of crows has worsened the problem.



*Crows gather for snacks on the Common*

On the other hand, crows are much liked by those who observe animal behaviour. Members of the crow family have some of the largest brains of any bird relative to their size. This enables a degree of intelligence not found in most bird species. For example, captive New Caledonian crows are famous for being able to work out how to bend a piece of wire into a hook and use it to retrieve grubs that they can't otherwise reach.

Among other admirers of crows are those who feed birds on our Common. Toss a handful of food near a crow and it won't be long before a mass of them arrive, cheekily coming close and jostling for a share. In the winter, gulls will arrive too, but it is crows that are top dog.

Outside of the breeding season, most of the local crows seem to head for Biggin Wood in the evening to join the overnight roost there. Although they roost more or less happily in one large group, outside the roost crows will sometimes fight quite ferociously. Usually the fights are between members of different extended families.

## Fencing off the Common

Any of you who visit the main woodland area on the Common can hardly have failed to notice that three areas have been successively fenced off. It has been several years since the first area was enclosed and a decision has now been made, in principle, to remove the fencing as it has served its purpose of allowing an understory to develop.

Three factors combined to enable the understory to develop. One was the selective felling of a few trees to let more light in. A second was that the fencing helped retain leaf fall from the trees, which in turn helped enrich the thin layer of topsoil and prevent it being washed away by rain. Third, the fence prevented trampling of the area; hopefully, the understory - especially the brambles! - will

mean that walkers stick to paths after the fencing has gone.

When the fencing has been removed, it will be repurposed to enclose an area of acid grassland opposite Streatham Common South. This rare habitat is badly in need of restoration. The project is being managed by the London Wildlife Trust which has selected a contractor; work should begin soon and be completed this year.

**A big welcome to Vicky Peet**, who is SCCoop's new Rookery Manager. She is already familiar with the Rookery and the Common as she has been running Froglife's *Wild Times* project here and has been involved with creating better habitats for amphibians in the Rookery and the woodlands.



## Wildflowers on the Common

Nobody would say that Streatham Common is rich in wildflowers but there should be an upturn in richness and diversity, perhaps as soon as next year, once a planned collaboration between Lambeth Council and Butterfly Conservation gets going. The plan is particularly aimed at increasing wild

flowers that are good sources of nectar for butterflies and moths in the grassland above the tennis court. This is known as Hilly Four Acres, a name retained from when the meadow was part of a farm.

One part of the proposed work is to change the mowing regime of part of the meadow and then sow wild flower seeds once the ground has been prepared. Another part of the plan would involve stripping the turf from three strips of the meadow and using seeds and plugs to create a diversity of wild flowers.

While these actions should provide a real boost to the Common's wildflowers and butterflies, it is not as though one cannot already find some wildflowers if one keeps one's eyes peeled.

For example, the triangular grass area that fronts on to Streatham Common North right at the top of the Common has plenty of Lady's Smock or Cuckooflower in April. At least it usually does. But last year a local resident pointed out to the Friends that the area had been mown before the flowers had a chance to set seed. We contacted Lambeth's head of mowing about this and are glad to say that the first mow was later this year. This flower is the preferred source of nectar for Orange-tipped butterflies.

In mid summer, Common Knapweed is a good source of nectar for several different butterflies. This plant is found in profusion



on many kinds of grassland but for some reason is very scarce on our Common. This year there was just one specimen - albeit a fine one as the photograph on the previous page shows.

Orchids are also a scarcity on the Common (and visited by insects other than butterflies).



All we have at present is a single Common Spotted Orchid - the one in the photograph - which grows on Hilly Four Acres; there is also at least one Broad-leaved Helleborine growing in the main woodlands

but it has not succeeded in flowering for the past few years.

We could do with a proper survey of the Common's wildflowers and, indeed, other plants. Would anyone like to take this on? If so, email [friendsofstreathamcommon@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofstreathamcommon@gmail.com)

### Dates for your diary

**11th September. Wind Day** from 10.00am to 4.00pm at the bottom of the Common. Bring, fly or buy kites. And bring a picnic as there will be no food or drink stalls this year.

**16th September: Bat Walk.** Meet by the Rookery Café at 7.25 pm. The walk will be led by Dr Iain Boulton, from Lambeth Council, and will last about one hour. Bring a torch. Booking essential: email [IBoulton@lambeth.gov.uk](mailto:IBoulton@lambeth.gov.uk)

## What's Up?

**Café fencing** - it has taken a long time, but the badly dilapidated fencing around the Rookery Café and surrounding areas has now been replaced. Lambeth Council chose to use metal rather than wooden fencing because it is longer lasting. The new fencing at the back of the cafe will prevent unwanted access to the woodland strip along Covington Way.

**Water leaks** - it has taken even longer, but at last the leaks in the Rookery have been fixed. The most noticeable of these had caused part of the grassy slope to be fenced off for many months. Responsibility for finding and repairing the leaks bounced around between SCCoop, Thames Water and Lambeth Council for a long time, but eventually landed on the council.

**Rubbish bins** - at least a dozen new bins should be in place fairly soon. Some will be replacing old bins and some will be additional. All are of a design that should prevent foxes and crows from getting at the rubbish and then scattering it around the area. At the same time, existing bins inside the woodland will be removed as they cannot be accessed by vehicle and emptying them is therefore time consuming.

At this year's AGM the following people were elected to the Friends Executive:

*Chair* - Tracey Williamson

*Vice-chair* - Caroline Hewitt

*Secretary* - David Malley

*Treasurer* - Nick Cattermole

*Publicity and Social Media Officer* - Richard Payne

*Membership Secretary* - Caroline Hewitt

*Common Knowledge Editor* - Peter Newmark

*Volunteer Co-ordinator* - Anne Hamilton

*Other Members* - Lawrence Schoeb, Mike Robinson, Andrew Simpson, Alisa Wakley