

Chairman's Annual Report

This report was given at the FOCC AGM on 24 February 2012

This is my first report as Chairman of the Friends. I said in the Spring Newsletter that Mike Warburg would be a hard act to follow; and in that, at least, I was right. The Committee have tried to keep the Friends' activities running smoothly, and although there may have been one or two hiccups I think we have been reasonably effective. But if any Members have any comments, or ideas for doing things better, or ideas for doing something new, please tell any member of the Committee: communication and participation can only be good for the Friends and for our shared objective, conserving and safeguarding the Common.

I have to admit that the success of the programme of events has been somewhat varied: attendances have fluctuated, though I believe that those who have attended have found the events worth while. At the last AGM Andrew Goddard spoke about "the Biodiversity of Chorleywood Common", and the indoor programme for 2010-11 concluded with an illustrated talk by Phil and Ann Farrar on the successful reintroduction of Red Kites in the Chilterns and elsewhere in the country.

The first outdoor event of the season was Pond Dipping, early in June: the children ended up wet, tired and happy after making the acquaintance of some of the life in Darvell's Pond, including two goldfish which Andrew Goddard took away to be rehomed – many thanks to him and to Mike Warburg for organising and supervising. The Herb Walk a fortnight later was very poorly attended, the result partly of threatening weather and partly of inadvertently fixing the event for Fathers' Day; but despite that, Victoria Stainsby has kindly agreed to lead another walk this summer – 24 June is the date, so put it in your diaries to come and be amazed at all the uses of what grows wild on the Common. Village Day was successful, in particular Archie Lang and Jeremy Graham spent the whole day introducing inquisitive children to newts; and a fair number of our visitors were interested enough to sign up for membership. Thank you to everyone who took a turn at manning the stall and explaining who we are and what we do. At this point I want to mention particularly Les Dacre, who has been a stalwart of the Committee for many years and has taken the lead in all sorts of practical tasks, including setting up and clearing up on Village Day and at the evening meetings here in the Library; Les has decided that he wants to stand down from the Committee, though he will continue to be involved in our activities. I invite you to express our appreciation of everything he has done for the Friends.

The Flower Walk in July, led by Peter Monahan and Martin Hicks, was well attended and successful, at least for those who did not mind running for cover when the rain came down; and it proved a good opportunity to discuss some of the pros and cons of grazing (of which more later). I confess that I did not get in touch with the Hearts and Bucks Fungi Group in time to arrange a Fungus Foray for the autumn, but communications have now been established, and the plan is to include an event on the

Common, for us and for their members, in their programme for this year.

This season's winter programme started in October with Geoff and Jo Russell talking about Badgers on your Doorstep, which was well attended, and continued in November with David Rayvern Allen on the history of cricket on the Common, which for some reason only attracted a low turnout. At the end of this evening's meeting Mark Carter of the Countryside Management Service will be telling us about the work of CMS and how it relates to local interest groups (like us); next month (15 March) is "Chorleywood on Ice", what this place was like in the last ice age; and the final meeting for this season will be on 19 April, when Peter Monahan will be talking about how common management has evolved over the last 20 years. The preparation of the summer programme of outdoor events is well advanced; details will be in the next Newsletter, and e-mail reminders will continue to be sent out to those who can receive them.

This appears to be the appropriate point at which to mention that the Committee have discussed the possibility of setting up a Friends of Chorleywood Common website; that is work in progress at the moment, and we will let everyone know when it is ready to go "live".

Those Members of the Friends who take part in voluntary work on the Common have had quite a varied year; as always, pond work has been the largest single item, and the spring of 2011 saw completion of the new reed bed at Christchurch Pond, which received the accolade of becoming a nesting place for waterfowl. In addition, the signs on the Common have been cleaned; the never-ending job of pulling ragwort has continued; and the volunteers re-painted, very effectively, the gates at the cricket club and "lorry" parking areas. Our thanks to Simon Varnals for organising this part of the Friends' activities; anyone interested in participating should get in touch with him.

I expect you are all aware that there have been several suggestions and proposals about the use of the Common raised by, or with, the Parish Council; I have tried to keep our Members informed, through the Notes of Open Spaces Committee and Full Council meetings which we circulate by e-mail. On all these issues, I emphasise that it is important for everyone who has an opinion to let the Parish Council know: they want to be told what residents think. The Committee of the Friends keep up a dialogue with the Council, and we pass on what we believe are the opinions of the majority of our members; but there is a range of opinion, and all of it needs to be expressed.

The main issue has been the grazing project: in brief, the position reached is that the Council is now consulting on a proposal for grazing Larks Meadow and some of the adjoining woodland once a year, using temporary fencing within the Common, and starting in September and continuing as long as the grass lasts; meetings between the Council's Working Party and known supporters and critics of the project are being arranged, and it is suggested that there should be a new "species survey" of the flora and fauna of the grazing compartment, as a baseline for assessing the results of the cattle being on the Common. The Committee of the Friends support the idea of

grazing in principle, and we have tried to make constructive suggestions.

The suggestion of a new children's play area is now with Three Rivers Council, whose initiative it is. You probably know that the Parish Council set up an Advisory Committee (on which the Friends of the Common were represented) to identify possible sites: the Advisory Committee has now completed its work, and the Report will be sent to Three Rivers, who are expected to consult widely on any proposal they formulate.

There has also been a change (suggested by the Countryside Management Service) in the policy for managing the ponds on the Common: it is now proposed to let all the existing ponds develop over the years through a natural cycle from "new" through "open water" to "drying out", and then dig out and start again, and also to create one or more additional ponds, the idea being that it is advantageous to wildlife to have all these different habitats available.

The pressure on car parking, particularly at the Memorial Hall, continues to increase; but at the moment there does not appear to be any likelihood of any of the permissive parking areas being enlarged. The Cricket Club's proposal to move the "square" away from the road is in abeyance, but discussions have started about a plan to rebuild the pavilion. On all of these, "watch this space".

I want to end with a big "thank you" to all the members of the Committee for the time and effort they put in. I have already referred to some of them, and everyone does his or her bit; but I want to acknowledge in particular that the Friends could not operate without the steady work of the Secretary and the Treasurer.