

Chorleywood Parish Council: Open Spaces Committee -

Notes by GH (in attendance as a member of the public) of matters relevant to Chorleywood Common raised at the meeting on 22 May 2012

[Note: all councillors can attend a meeting of any Committee, and this meeting was fully attended, but the voting on decisions was by members of the Open Spaces Committee only.]

Cllr Edwards, as Chairman, expressed the Committee's thanks and appreciation to Cllr Mrs Jarrett for her many years' service as Chairman of the Committee.

Matters arising from the Minutes: it was reported that negotiations are still in progress with Veolia Water over terms for installation of their monitoring borehole.

Grazing. The Chairman suspended the meeting to enable representations to be made by members of the public who were present. A range of views were expressed: that as a compromise, the area between the allotments, Artichoke Dell and the top west corner of Larks Meadow should be excluded in the interests of the amenity of residents who use and overlook that area (and which would reduce the cost of fencing); that the project had been rushed and not fully considered; that in view of the large proportion of natural meadows which have been lost since 1949 it is important for species diversity to start to implement the necessary long-term plan now; and that excluding the part of the proposed area which is visible from Dog Kennel Lane would send the message that grazing is hazardous and needs to be tucked away, which is the wrong message to send (particularly to children). The questions were raised whether there was a risk of over-grazing; whether an Environmental Impact Assessment had been undertaken to ascertain whether the wooded part of the grazing area was a habitat of Bechstein's Bat, and to assess the risk of damage to the Common from agriculture; and whether Chorleywood Common is an "urban common". *[The significance of the latter question is believed to be that "urban commons" are subject to public rights of access for "air and exercise" under Law of Property Act 1925 section 193.]*

Mark Carter of the Countryside Management Service advised that upland commons are at risk of over-grazing but lowland commons are generally under-grazed, which is what leads to the growth of secondary woodland, and the opinion of Natural England is that grazing made the Common what it was and can make it so again; there are no records of Bechstein's Bat on the Common and it would be likely to prefer ancient woodlands such as Carpenters Wood; restoration of part of the Common to its former condition by grazing would be a lengthy process which would have to be monitored carefully.

In answer to a question from Cllr Liley, it was confirmed that legal advice on the "urban common" question is awaited. In discussion, Cllr Mrs Worrall (Chairman of the Grazing Working Party) confirmed that the Council and the farmer would both have appro-

prorate insurance; the issues were the area to be grazed, the type of fencing to be used and the access to be provided. The Working Party had concluded that the best environmental cost-benefit balance was achieved by the plan they had put forward; they had considered questions as to obstruction of access, as to the removal of cattle and as to the effect of snow - in that event feed for the cattle would not be introduced, but they would be immediately removed. Cllr Mrs Worrall proposed, first, that the Council remains committed to the reintroduction of grazing; and secondly that grazing should be continued in accordance with the Working Party's proposals, subject to the preparation of detailed costings and to the advice to be received on the outstanding legal questions. Both proposals were voted on by the members of Open Spaces Committee and carried *nem con* (one abstention), and will be considered by Full Council at its next meeting on 26 June. Cllr Mrs Worrall noted that the exact costings would depend on the number and type of access points to be provided, and that the Working Party had not had any representations from the public on that topic.

NB: (i) a group of FoCC committee members walked the proposed fence lines on 26 May and are preparing a letter to the Parish Council on the subject of access-points;

(ii) any Chorleywood resident who has an opinion on any aspect of the grazing proposals is entitled to write to the Council about it, and the Committee of FoCC encourages such feedback - it is important for the Council to know the strength of the support, the opposition, and any doubts.

Ranger's report. *[The report is extensive and detailed; the following points appear particularly significant.]* Tree, scrub and stump grinding work continued until it had to be stopped because of nesting birds; there will be further tree work in next winter's programme. The amphibian breeding season is well underway and recent rainfall has topped up the ponds, so there is a good chance of all species' larvae reaching metamorphosis. An analysis of old maps has revealed the sites of two ponds which are no longer present; one of them temporarily held water after the recent rainfall, so it may be worth restoring. Testing of the Christchurch Pond silt has shown high levels of contaminants; advice is awaited from the Environment Agency as to how best to dispose of it. The Rangers have identified a possible route for the suggested play / leisure trail *[see below]*. One of the Rangers attended a Lichens, Mosses and Earthworms survey organised by FoCC, the results of which are to be added to the national biological records database. *[Follow-up meeting in Chorleywood Library, Thursday 31 May, 8 pm.]* A Ranger has also received training to support an application made to Natural England for a licence to handle Great Crested Newts.

Cllr Mrs Worrall updated the meeting on the roadworks at the junction of the A404 and Common Road: some water and debris had escaped into the pond nearer the traffic lights, and the effect if any on the Great Crested Newts in that pond was not yet clear. The contractors had taken the problem seriously when it was brought to their attention;

the Ranger will make a written report to record the incident. *[Note: Mike Warburg looked at the pond shortly after the meeting, and at least the part furthest from the traffic lights then appeared to be in good condition.]*

There was some discussion of possible additional ponds, including the sunken area between Darvell's Pond and the road, and a site near the Dew-pond (as well as the area near the Lorry Park already under investigation).

Works programme 2012-13. The meeting considered the programme for pond, tree and grassland maintenance. The programme includes restoration of Christchurch Pond (it is not yet known whether Natural England will approve of this being done "in one go" or will want it spread over several seasons); tree felling and stump grinding in the area immediately to the east of the station car park; and collecting and spreading heather seed in the grassland either side of Darvell's Pond - the latter is identified as a project in which volunteers could participate.

Possible "play trail". Following previous discussions, the Rangers have identified a possible route for a play trail, with items such as stepping stones, tunnels and wood for "dens": starting at the Lorry Park and going to Top Common Ponds, then parallel with Common Road and returning along the fire ride towards the cricket club and back to the Lorry Park. The Committee considered that the proposal was a starting point for discussion; health and safety issues (for example) would need to be checked. Natural materials from the Common would be used, so the only cost implications would be the Rangers' time, including maintenance, and, if so decided, an information leaflet. Cllr Mrs Sutherland suggested that it would be useful to look at similar projects in other places.

War Memorial Hall parking area. The meeting discussed a letter from a user of the parking area who had fallen during the bad weather and broken her wrist, and more generally whether it was appropriate, in snowy weather, to clear that or any other Council property: it was feared that the Council might actually be more likely to be held liable if it had taken steps to clear snow, because that might suggest it has undertaken responsibility for making the area in question safe. The issue will be raised with the Council's insurers.

Signage on the Common. The signs are not in very good condition, and those on the Horse Track particularly need attention. It was felt that signage should not be overdone: the public are entitled to walk anywhere on the Common and it is therefore inappropriate to mark footpaths in a way which might suggest they were the only paths which should be used; Cllr Edwards felt it would be desirable to reduce the number of signs at the Shepherds Bridge parking area. Funding of £1000 is available from the Chiltern Conservation Board for information lecterns, which it was felt would be appropriate in relation to the ponds and the grazing project; the other priority would be the Horse Track, as to which Cllr Mrs Worrall suggested that riders' input should be obtained by

involving the Chess Valley Bridleways Association.

"Four Year Vision": priorities. The meeting discussed the relative priorities to be assigned to Open Spaces Committee's suggested projects for the Council's "Four Year Vision", and decided on the following order (highest priority first):

1: investigate "**water harvesting**" for the allotment sites (to be discussed with Veolia Water);

2: make arrangements for future **butterfly surveys** - Mr Bill Cattle, who has undertaken such surveys for the Council for many years, has agreed to train volunteers to continue to make them.

Note: FoCC Committee have agreed to publicise this project and to ask for volunteers to come forward: will anyone interested please get in touch with Greg Hill (e-mail gregoryjshill@btinternet.com or telephone, evenings or weekends, 283555); Mr Cattle's surveys are made in June or July, so the project needs to get going fairly soon.

3: investigate possible "**leisure trail**"

4: **signs and lecterns**

5: **Hollybush Hall**, change of use to **Education Centre** - at present this is fairly low priority for Open Spaces Committee, because the first steps on this project are for the Village Halls committee

6: establish ongoing programme of **wildlife etc surveys** on the Common.

GH