

## **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 12 November 2013**

**Public Forum.** Mr Naylor-Smith, of the Golf Club, spoke about the car parking area opposite the Memorial Hall: it is heavily used throughout the week and this is having a serious effect on the finances of the Club, because members are reluctant to renew membership if they cannot park; visiting clubs and other organisations are also not coming back. He asked the Council to approve the proposed system for issuing tickets, at a time which will discourage commuters, for cars to display, and if possible to make the decision before the end of February, which is when the Club's membership renewals are due. He indicated that the Club might be willing to contribute to the set-up costs. (The system would need to be introduced at both the Memorial Hall and Shepherds Bridge parking areas, and two ticket machines would be needed at each site, £5,000 each, to avoid complaints if tickets could not be issued because one machine broke down.) The Committee agreed to set up a joint working party with the Club: the Council members will be Cllr Watkins and Cllr Mrs Worrall, with Cllr Khiroya as substitute.

GH on behalf of FoCC said that any reduction in the number and obtrusiveness of the signs at the parking areas would be warmly welcomed, but suggested that caution should be exercised in introducing new signs elsewhere on the Common.

**Matters arising from Minutes.** Cllr Mrs Worrall enquired as to the position on the replacement of the Commoners' Steward; the Clerk reported that there had been no further progress.

**Finance.** The Clerk reported that there had been 23 visits to the Common by schools and other children's groups, most of which would be eligible for grant funding at £100 each; an application under the Higher Level Stewardship scheme was about to go in.

**Open Spaces Officers Report.** *The full report is lengthy and detailed; rather than attempting to select and summarise, I have annexed to these Notes a copy of the passages dealing specifically with the Common; the complete report can be made available. What follows is a summary of the Committee's discussion of the report.*

**Storm damage:** Cllr Mrs Worrall asked whether any of the fallen trees, already cleared after the storm, could have been retained for children to play on; the Ranger explained that the timber that had come down was not high-quality (that was why it had come down), and would be hazardous as a play facility; much of it had been collected in piles to form habitats for invertebrates, amphibians, etc.

**Newts and Cricket Pavilion:** Cllr Mrs Worrall, supported by Cllr Mrs Jarrett, suggested that Natural England should be asked to clarify what works could be done to the Cricket

Pavilion, and at what time of year, in view of the Pavilion's proximity to Christ Church and Top Common Ponds.

**Reptile Survey:** the report contained a recommendation that the Committee should consider retrieving the results of the reptile survey on the Common which TRDC undertook as part of the Play Area project. The Ranger explained that the Parish Office did not know what data TRDC had or whether it had been written up. He suggested that if it had been written up, it should have been sent to Martin Hicks at Herts Biological Records Centre and he could be asked for a copy; if not, it would be possible to find out the cost of writing up, and a contribution to funding might be available from Higher Level Stewardship. Cllr Mrs Sutherland proposed that the information should be obtained by the most economical route; seconded by Cllr Mrs Worrall and agreed unanimously.

**Resurfacing at Christ Church car park:** this has not been done yet. It is hoped that the job will be done in one day, on a weekday but when the children are not at the school. The total cost is not known: the price of the aggregate used fluctuates considerably.

**Tree survey:** the report also contained a recommendation to take advice from a tree professional on the best way to deal with the potential hazards created by the storm at the end of October. The Ranger said that the immediate need is to deal with all trees on the Common which the Rangers have identified as now being hazardous: about 20 or more trees either in busy areas or of high environmental value. As a separate exercise, it will also be desirable to put in place an ongoing survey of the condition of trees on the perimeter of the Common and on the boundaries with properties in the Dells: a budget for this will be considered at the next meeting. Cllr Edwards proposed from the chair that the Committee should accept the recommendation to get advice on the trees causing immediate concern; carried.

The Committee thanked the Ranger for a very full and useful report.

**Nature Trail / Play Trail:** the Full Council meeting in October decided that Open Spaces Committee should be asked to take this concept forwards. The Council's temporary Research Assistant, Emma Bindloss, has been working on developing and funding the project, and gave a presentation on progress so far made. The objective is to involve a wide range of interest groups and to encourage children (and their families) to enjoy, learn about, and move around on the Common – the feedback the Rangers have had from school visits has been that they are both educative and fun, and encouraging vigorous exercise also addresses, to some extent, the problem of children being overweight or even obese. The thinking is that the Trail could be joined at any point; there would be "Welcome Boards" in all the parking areas and information boards or lecterns at points of special interest; the boards etc would have "QR codes" connecting via users' mobile phones to on-line resources (such as maps, stories, and suggestions about things to look for); and a wide variety of features could be included, such as the "holly tunnel" already created, climbing logs, perhaps a maze, carvings and den building materials – the Rangers are already identifying possibilities. (It will be necessary to check what is

and is not permissible under the Commons Act 2006: for instance several pieces of timber might become a “structure”, requiring Defra consent, if they were bolted together.)

Various possible funding sources have been identified including the Heritage Lottery Fund; an application will be made. Funders wish to encourage the involvement of voluntary groups – such as FoCC.

The Committee thanked Emma for her hard work and agreed to the concept of a nature trail, and accepted the recommendation that a “Public Forum” to publicise the project should be held on a date to be confirmed in the New Year. *[This is likely to be combined with an event explaining the “virtual fencing” proposal for future conservation grazing: see below.]*

**Grazing – Public Forum:** Mr Hartley asked for confirmation that the Council would be fully insured if a cow on the Common injured anyone; that there will be an Open Day; and that the “virtual fencing” will leave a clear pedestrian route along the side of Dog Kennel Lane and around Artichoke Dell. The Clerk confirmed that if the Council resolves in due form to undertake the grazing, there will be £50 million of insurance cover (in fact the breed of cattle to be used, English Longhorns, are docile and not bothered by dogs, and injuries from cattle happen principally on farms – on Commons, incidents with dogs are far more frequent); there will be an Open Day; and there will be clear zones along the side of the road and around the Dell.

**Committee discussion:** Cllr Watkins commented that as the virtual fencing uses a buried cable, the boundaries of the grazing compartments will not be obvious. In practice, the cattle get an audible warning when they come within 10 metres of the cable, and do not go closer. It is suggested that some of the posts already acquired should be put in the “slotties” already installed along Dog Kennel Lane and across the top of Larks Meadow (but without rails or wire between them, on which basis the Open Spaces Society accepts that they will not be “structures” for the purposes of the Commons Act), as a visual indication for the cattle, and with notices to inform users of the Common that grazing is in progress and indicating that dogs should be kept on leads; Cllr Mrs Sutherland suggested that maps indicating the area being grazed should also be displayed at all the parking areas. At the beginning of a grazing session the posts and notices could be fairly close together, and some of them taken away as the cattle and the public become used to the system. Care will be taken to ensure that the posts are easily removable. The Committee also discussed the possibility of marking the compartments with lines on the ground, but concluded that this would not be suitable.

Authorisation is needed at this stage for installation of the equipment and to give the grazier the go-ahead to train the cattle. Total funding available in the budget is £12,400-odd and the quoted cost (with part of the work being done in-house) is £10,200-odd, leaving a reserve of £2,200-odd; and some additional Higher Level Stewardship funding is likely to be available because English Longhorns are a “rare breed”.

An Open Day will be arranged in the New Year, also publicising the proposed Nature Trail, and there will be a “meet the cattle” event in one of the proposed compartments. The local schools, and the Scouts, Cubs and Brownies, have already indicated that they are interested in the project.

The Committee accepted the recommendations that (1) the proposal to graze the Common using virtual fencing should be approved; (2) the first session should be in the spring of 2014 for a short period followed by a longer period in the autumn; and (3) that an information day should be held to explain the concept of virtual fencing and the benefits of conservation grazing.

**New tractor:** the Committee approved the purchase, for £18,000-odd after part exchange, of a new tractor, which will be smaller and more manoeuvrable, and with greater capabilities, than the existing one.

**Revised Budget 2013-14:** an easement fee of £3000 has been received; this will be earmarked for use in connection with the Common.

**RSPB Bird Survey – *Public Forum*:** Michael Hyde referred to the suggestions in the report for encouraging plants to provide food for birds, and suggested that the management of the Common should also be designed to benefit butterflies and other fauna. GH, also referring to the passages about food plants, said that although the introduction of plants from off the Common would presumably not be permitted, managing and spreading the seed of plants already present might be an activity with which volunteers could help, under the direction of the Rangers.

***Committee discussion:*** the report includes details of the species observed on the Common, by members of the Chorleywood and District RSPB local group, on monthly visits from October 2012 to September 2013 – 52 species in all, some resident and some transient or migratory, some common and some scarce. It also includes detailed recommendations of plants which would make the Common more attractive to the species which were less frequently observed. The Ranger explained that the report did not take full account of the constraints on the management of the Common which are imposed by its status as a common and a Local Nature Reserve, etc. Plants cannot be introduced, or even transplanted from one location on the Common to another, though seed can be spread. The habitats of the greatest general importance are the grassland ones; the woodland areas are comparatively young, 60 years or so, and do not yet have anything like the biodiversity of old-established woods. The management objectives are all long-term; one project for consideration is improving the quality of the gorse by coppicing it on a rotational basis (something with which the volunteers might be able to help), and managing the woodland edges to encourage it to spread. The activities undertaken on children’s organised visits to the Common sometimes include making nest boxes; some of them could helpfully be put to use on the Common. When trees are taken out of grassland, the stumps need to be ground out; but subject to safety considerations, dead trees in the wooded areas can be left standing to provide a habitat for insects and a re-

source for birds that eat insects. Grazing Larks Meadow may in due course create bare patches in the grass, suitable for use by skylarks. It is also planned to leave 6 metre buffers around the ponds, not to be mown each year until September; the Golf Club will be approached with a view to doing so at the Dew Pond. Gulls are frequently seen on the outfield of the cricket ground, but not on the fairways of the golf course, probably because the Golf Club have been given permission to use chemicals to control worms. All suggestions for making the Common more “bird-friendly” can be considered in connection with the next revision of the Management Plan.

Cllr Mrs Worrall commented that even though the range of plants on the Common may not be as diverse as the RSPB would prefer, there are some very old and diverse hedges in the residential parts of the Chorleywood Common Conservation Area, and one aspect of the proposed Community Plan may be the preservation of such hedges.

The Committee decided to thank the RSPB for the report and to make a donation of £50 to RSPB funds. In due course the report will be put on the Council’s website, with explanations of which recommendations can be accepted, and which cannot, and why.

*GH*

*Annexure: extracts from Open Spaces Officers Report to Open Spaces Committee, 12 November 2013.*

#### **4.4 Chorleywood Common**

- Following the cut and lift by contractors 118 bales of hay were collected and placed in the Lorry permissive parking area with the usual free hay signs. Stacking started on the Tuesday and all had gone by the Friday.
- In house cut and lift by the Rangers has included the following areas:
  - Top of Common Road
  - Common Road around the heathers
  - The other side of the ditch on Common Road
  - A large strip alongside the first hole on the golf course
  - In front of the Kennels (flail cut as too steep to use the cut and lift machinery)
  - The area left for butterflies around Cheery tree Dell has had three long strips cut and lifted to facilitate sledging when it snows later in the year.
  - The area south of Cherry Tree Dell to Larks Meadow
  - Edges of Chorleywood Bottom and the Railway Fence line
  - Grass directly in front of the Old Shepherd
  - Two small areas with high ecological value to the west of the Old Shepherd
  - May bushes
  - Field above the railway Field
  - The western side of Larks Meadow and the bottom of larks meadow
  - Acid grassland either side of the Cricket pitch
  - Under the trees on the lower part of Winnets Hill
  - Around the perimeter of some of the acid grassland areas on Dog kennel lane
  - By the seventh hole of the golf course

- Gun Dell area from Memorial Hall down to the Shepherds Bridge
- These areas are not cut and lifted by the Contractor due to limitations of their machinery. Some of the areas are under HLS therefore we are obliged to cut and lift them annually, others are not, however they are of equal ecological importance and some of the areas have had negative changes identified in last year's grassland survey. Previously these areas have not been cut and lifted due to the Parish not having the machinery to collect and the contractor's reluctance to damage their larger more complex machinery. With the purchase of the cut and collect flail, it is now possible to meet all of our HLS obligations for grassland and access these more difficult areas. It is hoped that we will see improvements to the biodiversity of these areas over time.
- A reptile survey was undertaken by TRDC, no results have as yet been seen by the Parish. It could be that the results were not produced given the decision on the Play area. If available, the Council might like to consider paying for the results themselves to gain an understanding of what was found.
- Flail cut of the bracken in and around the fire rides.
- A large fallen limb by Christchurch pond was cleared together with one on the Village Day Fire Ride prior to the storm in late October.
- Following the storm in the last week of October, considerable damage was incurred on the Common. This was the worst storm experienced in recent years. Worst hit areas are Fire rides, especially the Common Road side, may bushes and more open areas of the Common. However there are also fallen trees, hanging branches and snapped trees evident all over the Common. It is estimated that there is a good three to four weeks work by the Rangers to clear. Clearance work has already taken place around the fire rides with large habitat piles created with fallen wood from grassland areas, where it has fallen in the woodland areas it has been left to rot and form natural habitats. Clearance work will continue and a tree professional will be required to advise on the best way forward to deal with some of the potential hazards.
- The Parish Council hosted the Annual Chiltern Conservation Board Commons Day on Chorleywood Common in October. The theme this year was Sports and Recreation. It was a well-attended event by both CCB members as well as local interested parties including the Golf Club, Cricket Club, a representative from Christchurch School and Friends of Chorleywood Common. There was a lot of positive feedback on the day with very little criticism received.
- Water levels in the Ponds are increasing now the seasonal rains have arrived. Duck Weed has now been cleared from Sladdies by the Ranger and a volunteer from Friends of the Common. Whilst doing this one Great Crested Newt and one Smaller newt larvae were found, both close to metamorphosis. This indicates that the timing was about right, any earlier might have caught more newt larvae, any later and the duck weed would have sunk making retrievable impossible. Whilst out pond dip-

ping with an organisation called Bug storeys, a selection of newt larvae, toadpoles and invertebrates were noted.

- Play trail ideas are being progressed together with funding opportunities. The legal implications of these ideas are also being assessed.
- The Ranger has met with a number of residents to discuss trees at Darvells Yard, Appletree Dell and Clements farm. Work identified is being assessed and will be added to the Winter Work Programme.
- The bank at the Alms Houses has been strimmed. Due to the presence of wild flowers this is only done once year.
- A path behind Appletree Dell has been strimmed and overhanging foliage trimmed back to make it more accessible.
- Strimming has taken place around some of the benches on the Common.
- Brambles and saplings have been removed from the heather along Common Road. One patch has yet to be removed.
- Heather seed has been harvested for propagation in the Spring. This is part of the heather regeneration project covered under the HLS.
- Work on Christchurch car park initially delayed by lack of the appropriate gravel, has had to be postponed a second time due to the work required following the storm damage. It is now hoped that it will be completed on a School inset day in early December if all parties and materials can be co-ordinated and the weather allows. Some of the gravel will be used to top up the filter on Christchurch pond at the same time.
- A damaged sign on the Common near Christchurch School was repaired/reinstated.
- Reports of someone digging up the Common turned out to be a developer fitting a new water main to a development above Cedars Cottage along Dog Kennel Lane. Work was halted whilst negotiations were undertaken, an easement has now been granted at a charge of £3000 (ie £50 per metre) and the works are now completed.
- Volunteers from Friends of the Common, who at the request of the Ranger included a Great Crested Newt Licences holder, cleared vegetation from the tarmac path by the Top Common pond.

#### **4.5 Common Education**

- Education on the Common now forms part of the routine for the Rangers and is part of our obligation to the HLS. Funding is forthcoming under the HLS for such educational visits for the under eighteens, linked to the national curriculum, in groups of six or more. Information is provided via handouts about the Common, its biodiversity and uses. The handouts are tailored to suit the needs of each group. Since the last meeting the following groups have been taken out:

- U3A to look at Heather and Ponds,
  - St Clements Danes School to look at the ponds and undertake water testing
  - Christchurch School – Walk and Talk about habitats
  - Bug Storeys – a group dedicated to educating and raising awareness in children of the natural environment, three half term sessions pond dipping, netting for invertebrates through long grass and searching woodland habitats. Findings are to be reported back to the Council and Herts Biological Records Centre.
  - Woodoaks – half term session undertaking an Autumn Species Hunt
- A collection of tick box Species Hunts is being built up as part of this which can then be put on the Parish Council website for download by families and individuals to encourage greater use and awareness of the Common.

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