

Westcombe Woodlands Newsletter

Friends of Westcombe Woodlands
Winter 2014/15 Issue No.5



Chair's Letter

We have continued our volunteer work throughout the summer in the glade, and have recently planted about 300 wild flowers in plug form supplied by a specialist wild flower nursery. This has been in part of the glade, which we have recently cleared in order to increase its size. The fruit trees which we have already planted are thriving and we hope to dig in some further native fruit trees before Christmas. These have been purchased with the aid of the Capital Clean-Up Grant about which Frank writes in this newsletter.

The meadow grass has prospered over part of the glade but unaccountably not over another part. The purchase of a scythe will enable us to cut one part of the glade and we will be re-seeding the other. The hedge planted between the glade and the Seren Park development, made up of hawthorn and rose is now well established. The glade is a lovely place at any time of the year and I do urge Friends to turn up as volunteers at one of our monthly work sessions, so as to enjoy the surroundings as well as the sense of virtue achieved and good company.

The saga of the gate from the Seren Park Car Park into the woodlands is now nearing its close. The legalities are being tidied up, with the Blackheath Preservation Trust Woodlands Company paying for these legal costs. That

company and the Friends are dividing the costs of the gate between them. We are in the process of establishing the path down from the mound area towards the Car Park and we hope that early in 2015 we will have access to the lower part of the woodlands which no longer relies on the good will of the Mountfields in Maze Hill. Once that access is established and safe, we hope to engage with a local primary school, (with whom we have made contact) for limited and supervised access to the woods by the school children.

The Lasseter Place end of the woods has seen the planting of hundreds of bluebells together with birch, hazel and aspen saplings. The four rustic benches made from the wood of a large tree which fell in the glade, makes an attractive feature.

Our recent AGM was a success although disappointingly attended. We enjoyed an interesting and entertaining talk from Nick Day of the Plumstead Common Environmental Group about the trials and tribulations- and the rewards- of the work that they have organised and carried out at Plumstead Common over the years.

The proposals concerning the Woodland Trust which are explained elsewhere in this Newsletter were gone through at the AGM and were warmly welcomed. Indeed the feed-back which we have received over these proposals has been uniformly supportive.

It is sad that Alex Grant is moving away from Greenwich and leaving the Committee of the Friends. He has been a valuable supporter and we hope to see him again on his return familial visits.

Tim Barnes



WILDLIFE IN WESTCOMBE WOODLANDS

Groups of volunteers have been taking a number of steps to find out more about the wildlife that uses the woodlands, either passing through, finding food or as a home.

The clearing of the Glade has not only drawn a lot more light to help our fruit trees to grow and, in due course, to provide fruit, but it has also resulted in a fine crop of Rosebay Willow Herb, colonising the freshly-turned earth between the fruit trees.



Around the Glade we have seen Jersey Tiger and Swallowtail Moths, Small Magpie Micro-moths, Gatekeeper, Speckled Wood and Holly Blue Butterflies and *Volucella zonaria* one of the UK's largest species of hoverfly, a hornet mimic, (but, like all hoverflies, without a sting).



Volucella zonaria



Jersey Tiger Moth

We have also seen stag beetles, an endangered species whose larvae develop in rotting tree roots and stumps. Their presence is one of the reasons why it is important not to clear away too much dead wood when trees die or fall. We try to ensure safety, but to allow nature to do its work.



Stag Beetle



Swallowtail Moth



Small Magpie Micro-moth

In June a group of Friends went into the Maze Hill side of the Woodlands shortly before dusk with a number of bat detectors provided by Les Clark of the London Bat Group. We spotted a number of Common Pipistrelles, mostly around the Glade but also on the Mound and down the hill towards the end of the Seren Park car park. Les suspected that they were probably roosting in the Seren Park buildings themselves. In addition there were a few Soprano Pipistrelles and a larger bat, probably a Noctule bat although the identification was not positive. It might have been a Leisler's bat, which is similar in size.



Common Pipistrelle



Common Frog

The Mound is now establishing a good coverage of wild plants as well as the native shrubs and trees we have planted with the aim of stabilising it. What was, only just over a year ago, a bare slope of earth, now looks green from Tom Smith Close and the birches, hawthorn and aspen we have planted are establishing well. Back in the late summer a group of us were clearing and mulching around the new saplings and we found frogs lurking under the cover. That augurs well for our plans to build a wildlife pond at the Glade.

We lost a number of large trees during the storms this year. One of them collapsed on the bug hotel at Lasseter Place, which will require some re-building (although it still provides a superb shelter for a variety of bugs and beetles). Nearby, in a hole in a dead tree close to the back of the Ulundi Road gardens a pair of Nuthatches raised a brood. The same hole had been used by a pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers last year. They moved to a tree close to the Woodlands behind the bus stop on Vanbrugh Hill for this year's nest site.



Nuthatch



Great Spotted Woodpecker

Other birds nesting in the woods this year included Wrens, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Long-tailed Tits, Blackcaps, Dunnocks, Blackbirds, Jays and Robins. Goldcrests (the UK's smallest native bird) probably nested. In addition, we heard Green Woodpeckers although there was no sign of them nesting. Swifts from nearby colonies fed overhead and House Martins, Swallows and Meadow Pipits all passed over on migration. Some 64 Jackdaws from Greenwich Park used the Woodlands as a roost early in the year.

A tawny owl has been heard in the area on many occasions, so we have put up an owl box in the hope of attracting a breeding pair. It is high up, with a good flight path for the adult owls to fly in and out, but with branches close by so that the young owls can clamber out before they attempt their first flight. Sparrowhawks have been seen flying overhead. Sadly, we also found a dead Sparrowhawk near the top of the Mound. At least it is good to know that these wonderful raptors are hunting in the Woodlands.



Tawny Owl



Sparrowhawk

This is just a group of highlights of the creatures living in the Woodlands or using them in other ways. I am indebted to Joe Beale, whose observations have provided me with much of what I report here, and who always makes a walk through the woods so much more interesting. I would also like to thank Les Clark of the London Bat Group who led our twilight expedition in June and helped with the identification of the bats we detected.

Nigel Duncan
Autumn 2014

NEW ACCESS GATE

Anyone who has been on a volunteer session will realise that we need a new and better principal access point into the woodlands. Our legal right of way via Lasseter Place gives onto a very limited area and to work in the Glade area we have been relying on the generosity of a neighbour who is allowing us access through his garden, a situation which is clearly not guaranteed into the future. In addition, there is no suitable access for the Fire Brigade if they needed it in in the event of a fire.

For over two years, the present owner of the woodlands, the BPT Woodlands Company, has been in negotiation with the developer of Seren Park to give us permission to install a gate at the end of their car park (see map) and to pass over the access road, which is private property. The situation has been complicated by the involvement of the bank financing the project but we are now in the final stages of agreeing the legal documentation required.

The Friends committee has decided to make a contribution to the cost of buying and installing the gate and BPT will pay the rest, together with the legal costs. Work will then be needed in planning the exact route of the path up to the Glade and the strengthening needed to make it secure and stable.

Frank Smith

FINANCES

Since we came into existence in early 2012, our income has been made up of a combination of Friends' subscriptions (more than half the total) and grants; and each year we have finished with a modest surplus after the purchase of trees, plants, nest boxes, tools, etc.

Our ambitious plans for the future – the new gate, a strengthened and secure path up to the Glade, a pond, tool store, possible board walk etc. – will inevitably mean that we will have to be more active in seeking and applying for grants from the various available sources.

Recently we have received some generous donations from neighbours and we now hold almost £10,000 in total. All these funds are held with Barclays Bank, mostly in a deposit account.

Frank Smith

CAPITAL CLEAN-UP 2014



For the second year running we were successful in our application for a grant under the Capital Clean-Up campaign led by the Mayor of London. This is a scheme which in 2014 involved 54 community groups like ours spread over 22 London boroughs all aiming to spruce up their local areas.

This time we were awarded £720, an increase on last year, and used the funds to buy four more apple and pear trees, six natural timber benches (created by our tree surgeon from fallen timber in the woods), wildflower plants, bulbs and seeds, and also some more tools. These will all contribute to the enhancement of the woodland.

The main event was a Clean-Up Day on 12 August when a group of supporters removed many bags of accumulated rubbish. It was pleasing that a number of volunteers came to help for the very first time.

Proposed Reorganisation of the Friends

Many of you will have received the note re the future organisation of the Friends and the proposed link with the Woodland Trust, which was sent out prior to the AGM. Some will have heard what I had to say about the issue at the AGM. But as the proposed changes are of fundamental importance, I take this opportunity also to introduce you all to what is planned.



The woodlands are currently owned by the BPT Woodlands Company, a subsidiary of the Blackheath Society. It is that company which has entered into the present arrangement whereby the Friends maintain and improve the woodlands while the ownership remains vested in the Woodland Company. Frank Smith who is Vice-Chairman of the Friends is also Chairman of the Woodlands Company and the two bodies have worked well together.

But in the long term it is the view of the committee of the Friends, and that of the Blackheath Society that the best safeguard for the future of the woodlands lies in the ownership being transferred (for no consideration) to the Woodland Trust. That Trust would then enter into a long term lease, (at a peppercorn rent) with the Friends who would have the responsibility for maintaining and improving the woodlands as we are doing at present.

This arrangement would give the community the certainty that the woodlands would remain unalienable and free from any possibility of development in the future. It would enable the Friends to continue their volunteering activities, particularly in the glade area and in the construction of a new path down from the glade to the Seren Park Car Park where we will be erecting a gate for access purposes.

We have approached the Woodland Trust which is supportive of our proposals. Although arrangements of a similar kind that the Trust has entered into involve free public access to the woods concerned, we have explained that that is not what the Friends or the woodland company propose - and indeed because of the nature of the terrain it would not be safe. We intend to keep the woodlands as a relatively wild place, with access limited to volunteers on our action days, one or two open days a year and very limited and controlled access to the children from a local primary school. The Woodland Trust has agreed that there will be no 'public access' clause in the lease with the Friends.

The feedback which we have so far received from our membership has been supportive of the proposal. But there is still quite a lot of work to be done. The Woodland Trust require that as lessee of the woodlands under the lease the Friends should become a CIO, (a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.) At present we are simply an unincorporated association. A CIO gives a greater degree of certainty and permanence to the Woodland Trust. This will mean a new constitution, a new bank account and new membership, distinct from our existing structure.

The first thing is to prepare a new constitution and have it approved by the Charity Commission. The current committee has agreed such a constitution and the next step is to register it with the Charity Commission. We will then need to convene a Special General Meeting of the existing Friends to wind up its activities and to transfer its assets to the new CIO. I am afraid that this will involve new standing orders and direct debits from our existing members. Again we will let you know how and when to make these arrangements, assuming as I do, that all existing members of the Friends will elect to become members of the new CIO.

We will also need to be satisfied as to our obligations under the proposed lease for fencing and securing the woodlands. Any such obligation currently rests with the BPT Woodland Company and there is no way that the Woodland Trust will assume such a responsibility. Under the lease it will be the Friends who have that burden. So we need to be sure that we are not potentially entering into an open-ended commitment.

But I and the committee are confident that these and any other problem can be overcome and that the proposals provide the best way forwards for the future of the woodlands. I should say that with the exception of Alex Grant, who is moving away from Greenwich, all the current members of the committee have agreed to serve as trustees of the new CIO. There will be little, if any, change to the existing arrangements which seem to be working well.

Tim Barnes

Plans and proposals for the Woodlands

These have been prepared by Don Albrecht a member of the committee of the Friends and a professional landscape architect:

The first, (marked A) shows the 4 sections of the woodlands and the names that we have applied to them. The current access to the woodlands is either by the gate from Lasseter Place or from the back garden of 55 Maze Hill leading by a path up to the Glade in one direction and down via the mound towards the proposed Seren Park gate at the northern end of the woodlands, in the other direction.

The second plan (marked B) provides much more detail, most of which is self-explanatory. It records the dates when the Friends have done specific tasks within the woodlands. Some particular features which should be commented on are firstly the (long term) ambition to construct a timber boardwalk which would connect the Glade to Lasseter Place with ladder steps leading down to the boardwalk from the Glade side. This is an ambitious project. Many will know the steepness of the slope of the Seren Park escarpment.

Then there is the intention to build a pond in the northern part of the Glade with hopefully some bee hives in the same area. Finally we would comment on the path down to the proposed new entrance gate from the Seren Park Car Park. As the plan indicates it is likely that we will incorporate a handrail and some steps on part of the path leading down to the gate and the proposed secure tool store.

Don Albrecht



PLAN A: Management Areas November 2014



PLAN B: Strategic Plan 2014 – Location of gate at Seren Park and proposed works

After three years on the Friends of Westcombe Woodlands committee, Alex Grant is stepping down at Christmas, and is moving out of London. Here, he reflects on the Woodlands' past, present and future

"Can we go to the woods again this weekend, Daddy?" My eight-year-old daughter Alice hasn't contributed much labour on her regular visits to the Westcombe Woodlands - she's been busy exploring and building a tree house with other children - but spending Saturday and Sunday morning there with her, and other Friends, has been one of the most rewarding things I did in 16 years as a Greenwich councillor.



Mia, Alice and Eloise

Westcombe Woodlands aren't the only unspoilt woods in south-east London - Bostall, Lesnes Abbey and Oxleas Woods are also great places to explore - but they are the most magical. No other woodlands (other than railway embankments) sit on a hillside so steep. Yet suddenly you are confronted by the ten-storey blocks of Seren Park, glimpses of Canary Wharf through the foliage, or the sound of trains screeching in or out of Maze Hill station. The stark contrast between this wild woodland and its very urban surroundings is probably unique in London.

Much of the woodlands' magic derives from their secrecy. Although I was brought up just half a mile away from the woods in the 1980s and 90s, and served as a Labour councillor for the area from 1998 onwards, I was completely unaware of their existence until a decade ago. In about 2006 I was approached by Mary Sutherland and Ted Watts of the Blackheath Preservation Trust who told me about the woods - which I had always assumed were part of Vanbrugh Castle's back garden - and how the BPT wanted to pass them into new ownership. One option was handing the Woodlands over to a consortium of Ulundi Road residents, who would keep the woodlands undeveloped but not actively manage them. What eventually happened - handing the woodlands over to an arms' length woodland company, with a Friends Group to conserve and improve them - was much the better option.

Three years on from FOWW's establishment, under Tim Barnes' able chairmanship, it's worth reflecting on what's been done so far. A glade and a network of pathways have been created, and hundreds of trees and bulbs planted. Tree and bat surveys, and dozens of volunteer days, have been organised. Successful funding bids have been made and links forged with

local schools as well as London-wide and national ecology groups. Careful negotiation with neighbours has ensured that two access points to the woods have always been maintained - in spite of extensive building work at one of them. For a precipitous and barely accessible woodland which few local people even knew existed until a few years ago, these are big achievements.

I haven't been as active as other committee members and I have no expertise in woodland flora and fauna (though I know a little more now than I did three years ago). But I've tried to put FOWW in touch with the right people at the council, set up meetings between FOWW and neighbours at Tom Smith Close, worked with other committee members and local resident Pete Coomb to set up a FOWW website, and done my bit to help get an access gate from Seren Park opened up (one of our biggest challenges is that the only access to the Woodlands is through a back garden off Maze Hill or a private cul-de-sac off Vanbrugh Hill - neither of them ideal). Luckily, the committee has in Frank Smith someone with much more diplomacy, and patience with bureaucracy, than I will ever have.

With help from Neil Rhind and others, I also put together a short history of the Westcombe Woodlands (see www.westcombewoodlands.org/history/) which showed that its precipitous landscape is man-made, a result of seventeenth-century gravel pits: the woodlands may be very special, but ancient they are not.

It's been great to continue my involvement with the Westcombe Woodlands - one duty I will genuinely miss - since I stood down as a councillor in May. The Friends are enthusiastic volunteers with a worthy and ambitious mission: opening up the Woodlands to the local community as much as its ecology, and visitor safety, allow. I wish the Friends well and look forward to returning in a few years' time to see what more has been achieved.

Alex Grant

Volunteer Days for next year

Sunday 1st Feb

Saturday 7th March

Sunday 5th April

Saturday 9th May

Sunday 7th June