



The Common

The newsletter from the Horsell Common Preservation Society

Volume 22

Spring 2023



Planting 500 new heathers in
The Peace Garden.

Paws for thoughts!

Please help us to keep the Common safe for people, birds and the many species of wildlife that thrive here. A carelessly discarded cigarette or a portable BBQ can start a fire which is devastating for wildlife and dangerous to any walkers.

We love our dogs and they are welcome on the Common. Please be aware, that however friendly, a dog running around off the path can endanger ground nesting birds and their chicks. Even the most mild mannered of our four legged friends is shaped like a predator, to a bird! Even if he doesn't chase the birds, its presence can cause them to stop feeding, become stressed and even temporarily abandon their nest.

So please, Paws on Paths and no BBQs. Thank you to everyone who helps to keep our wild places safe and free of litter.

Caroline Hughes, Editor

Out and about

Estate Manager's Report

Wheatsheaf Common

The contractors who are working at Wheatsheaf common have been very busy over the winter and the project is starting to really come together.

The new boardwalks and network of paths are 80% complete and largely open for use. I have already noticed an increase in the number of people enjoying the space.

During the weekend of 4th and 5th February, around 160 volunteers managed to plant 3000 trees on Wheatsheaf Common. This wetland area will soon be completed and will serve as a flood alleviation scheme.

The following wildlife-friendly species were chosen:

- ◆ *Hazel, Rowan, Field Maple, and Black Alder* – each tree planted approximately 2 meters apart forming a graded woodland edge, or 'ecotone', between the existing mature Scots Pine canopy and flatter areas next to the newly-created wetland pools.
- ◆ *Guelder Rose, Alder, Buckthorn and Common Hawthorn* – planted very close together forming a dense 'hedge' barrier along the Chertsey Road, helping to keep out traffic noise and exhaust fumes.



Organised by Surrey County Council and supported by Horsell Common Preservation Society, the weekend was a great success with everyone happily getting their hands (and feet) extremely muddy, while helping to create a woodland in their local greenspace that will be more diverse and resilient to climate change.

It was lovely to see families with children planting trees who will hopefully see the new woodland areas develop over the next few decades, perhaps even returning with their own children in time! This is a great example of how public access can be improved while also improving the range and quality of habitat for wildlife. Much of the open area which has not been re-planted with trees will be left to establish vegetation naturally although some native aquatic plants will be introduced to the margins of the new ponds. These new ponds have been designed to accommodate flood water in the event of flash flooding and may dry out in the summer months. I am delighted by the overwhelmingly positive response from local residents about work at Wheatsheaf common and am looking forward to the greening and softening of the landscape as grasses and other plants return this year.

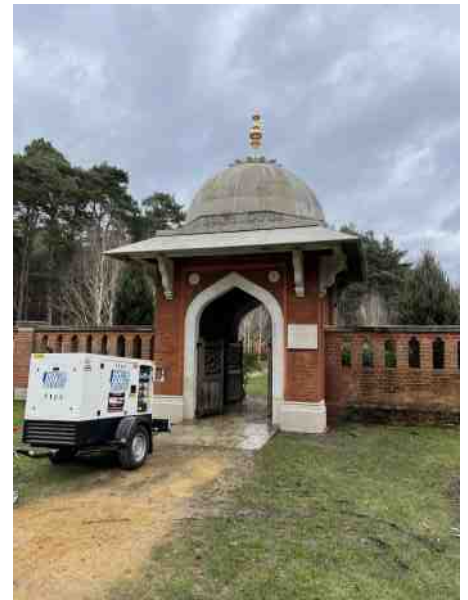


A little TLC for the Peace Garden

It had been noted that the stone dome or 'cupola' over the entrance to the Peace Garden on Woodham common had become quite discoloured, so we employed a specialist stone cleaning company to give the structure a thorough clean.

You can see from the photos that they did a great job of blasting off the black staining revealing the stone underneath. The same equipment will be used this year to clean the stone paving slabs inside the garden. The intense heat and drought of 2022 unfortunately killed the heather beds which were under the birches in rectangular beds.

Our great team of volunteers stepped in and have now replanted 500 young plants in fresh topsoil (see front page). We have also added a thick mulch to help retain moisture during dry spells in the future.



Path repairs at Heather Farm

Over the winter the paths at Heather Farm have really taken a battering from continued flooding, freezing, and thawing. We have work planned for the summer of this year to repair these paths, raise their height, resurface some sections and repair erosion to the banks of the river Bourne. The café and walks at Heather Farm continue to be incredibly popular and we want to make sure it is accessible all year round.



Jeremy using the new digger to clear ditches.



Max has made many four-legged friends at Horsell Common now and almost drags me out of the front door each morning in his enthusiasm to get to work. He does also enjoy his bed in the office though!

Jeremy Dalton

Senior Ranger's Report

Volunteering continues apace despite occasional tundra-like cold snaps

In December, challenging conditions did not deter our dedicated and skilled team of volunteers from cracking on with some much needed 'tundra' scrub clearance and tree-popping in the Danewell Gutter – not even slippery rivulets of ice, or snow-laden clumps of mature heather would keep them in check!

It's always good to throw a slightly different kind of activity in to the mix, and that's exactly what the volunteers were treated to in March this year. A far cry from battling with thorny scrub and yomping through mature heather, they were able to 'relax back' into a bit of leisurely heather planting in the Peace Garden. Two types of heather, one with white flowers and the other crimson, were carefully planted in alternating bands orientated towards Mecca - see front page.



Start of Autumn/Winter heather-mowing programme

For a week in February, we hired a tractor with a large flail mower/collector attached and drove around mowing heather at different heights deep within the open heath, far from footpaths and the public. Next year, we will mow the old age heather stands between areas we mowed this year, and so on each year. The aim – to eventually create (and then maintain) a patchwork heather ‘quilt’ with a diverse age and height structure.

Mowing will help to ‘rejuvenate’ the heath by stimulating heather regrowth, keeping it in a state more beneficial to our precious ground-nesters, insects and invertebrates. We’ve also used this kit to mow 2/3-metre-wide verges of short heather alongside main paths and firebreaks, improving the Common’s wildfire resilience. These mown ‘corridors’ may also provide migration opportunities for butterflies and insects.



More bare ground creation

Towards the end of 2022, we started a programme of bare ground creation, cutting an s-shaped scrape near the former model aircraft field in the central part of Horsell Common. In February this year, we continued the campaign cutting 2 more substantial scrapes – one in grasslands on a patch previously overrun with gorse, and another in an area affected by fire towards the Chertsey Road that has become overrun with *Molinia* grass.

In the short term, these scrapes will serve as basking sites for reptiles and provide foraging opportunities for birds, whilst in the longer term they give heather a head start to regenerate in advance of other vegetation. In both areas, we used some of the spoil to create South-facing slopes and hillocks - favourites of ground nesting solitary bees, wasps and ants. These will further add structural variation to the habitat once vegetation colonises them.



Commercial dog-walking licence scheme continues for 2023-24

The scheme runs from 1st April to 31st March each year. Dog walking companies operating their business on land owned by Horsell Common Preservation Society must be licensed by the society to do so. This year we have decided to increase the maximum number of dogs from 4 to 5 per dog walker. This has been benchmarked against local authorities who have dog licensing schemes and hopefully help to retain existing licence holders and bring others on board.

Information was sent out at the beginning of February, and so far about 5 companies have confirmed their renewal. We’ve also contacted several new companies who have popped up in our area over the past 12 months, explaining our scheme and encouraging them to sign up.

Rupert Millican

Horsell Common in Bloom

You might remember Kenneth Williams as “Arthur Fallowfield” with a rich Dorset accent, saying “The answer lies in the soil (zoil!)”.

Lowland Heath, which characterises much of HCPS lands, is infertile and acidic, a soil which supports few plants and these are highly specialised. In turn, these unique habitats support many and often rare insects, spiders, birds and reptiles. Lowland Heath requires some kind of human intervention if it is to persist. HCPS manages and maintains this habitat by conservation and restoration work which involves removing scrub pine and silver birch enabling heathers to regenerate and thrive. Today, barely 20% of Lowland Heath in the UK has survived. Horsell Common is part of the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area, (SPA), recognising the need to protect this habitat if its specialist plants and the birds and insects which breed here, are to survive.

Heathers, gorse and purple moor grass characterise plants on dry heath.



The commonest, on Horsell Common, is Ling (*Calluna vulgaris*). This looks rather dull for much of the year with its brown leaves not greening up until April and then flowering from July onwards. Its pale purple flowers grow in spikes. This becomes quite bushy and woody and was once used as fuel and bedding. The nightjar, a rare ground nesting bird which migrates to Southern England from sub-Saharan Africa, makes a rough nest on the ground sheltered by the bushy heather. In some areas of Horsell Common, the heather and gorse have been cut very short, allowing new growth. This is the habitat favoured by the rare ground-nesting woodlark and the silver-studded blue butterfly.

Bell heather (*Erica cinerea*) is the earliest to flower in June. Its flowers are a bright magenta pink, and its narrow dark-green leaves are arranged in whorls of three. It is named

after the bell-shaped flowers which are bigger than flowers on Ling.



Cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*) is sometimes known as bog-heather because it favours waterlogged areas. This evergreen shrub has rose-pink globular bells blooming at the shoot tips, the largest flowers of all the heathers and arranged in small clusters on one side of the stem. It gets its name from the distinctive whorls of four leaves that occur along the stem.



All heathers are a rich source of nectar and pollen, favoured by many species of bees and other insects.

Common Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) thrives on the same dry, acid soils as Ling. Its bright yellow flowers, from January to June, smell of coconut. Its spiny and dense evergreen growth offer protection in harsh weather for invertebrates and two birds characteristic of heathland, the Dartford warbler and the stonechat. The seeds are ejected from their pods in hot summer weather and can be heard exploding. By some, it is regarded as one of the top most invasive species worldwide due to its aggressive seed dispersal! This bush belongs to the pea family (legumes) and is eaten by the Belted Galloway cattle, part of the conservation team!



Similar to gorse is Common Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) This bush which is deciduous, has no spines and its flowers smell rather of vanilla! Its soft branches were used to make “brooms” and since the women used them for sweeping, it was a short

step to imagine them flying through the air on them! “Genesta” was the Latin name for this plant, which was worn, some say, as a spray in the hats of the “Plantagenets” so this modest bush gave its name to a family of kings. In the past few years, the broom has been growing well near Warren Pond on Horsell Birch.

The Wet Heathland plants.

Cross-leaved heath is found on the wet heath or mire, of the Danewell gutter. The waterlogged soil is very acidic and low in nutrients. This supports many rare mosses, sundew, cotton grass and bog asphodel.



Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) is a carnivorous plant which has adapted to this habitat by getting its nutrients from insects. Its round leaves have red glandular tentacles with sticky droplets which catch unwary insects. Their leaves curl inwards and trap the insect while the plant absorbs the nutrients.



Cotton Grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) is not related to the cotton plant but is a member of the sedge family. Its distinctive white fluffy seed heads give it its name. These fluffy seed heads have been used to stuff pillows and also as dressings for wounds.

Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*) flowers in summer. Its star-shaped sulphur-yellow flowers grow in a spike and create a glow of yellow in the boggy area, and then the seed pods turn orange after flowering.



The name “ossifragum” derives from the Latin for “broken bone”. Cattle grazing on boggy land had brittle bones and bog asphodel was seen as the culprit for causing this condition. In fact, acidic soil which lacks calcium, restricted this mineral in all plants growing there.

Bog asphodel is becoming more common and sheep farmers are concerned because lambs can be poisoned by this plant.

Much time and effort is expended by HCPS and wildlife organisations to manage and restore the Lowland Heath. One way to protect this fragile habitat has been to create alternative areas for recreation. These are known as “SANG” (Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace) The fields alongside the River Bourne, Mimbridge meadows and Bourne fields and other meadow areas such as McLaren park, have moist, loam, fertile soils which favour quite different flower and plant species.

In spring, celandines and coltsfoot followed by dandelions and buttercups. All these flowers are nectar rich and important for insects in springtime. In summer, purple loosestrife, yellow toadflax, tansy, achillea, geranium, vetch and clover. These meadows are not cut until September, allowing the seed to fall back into the ground for the following year. An abundance of species supports hundreds of insects and in turn, many birds feed on these insects and the seeds from the flowers.

Wild flowers in the Wetlands area (1)

Can you spot any of the following? You may be old enough to remember Brooke Bond spotter cards inside packets of tea and I-Spy books. I was always very excited to discover flowers described in them. Today, you can check on a wild flower app on your mobile phone, the name of a flower but I wanted to share with you some flowers I had spotted in the Wetlands during July and August.

In July and early August, it is possible to spot around 20 different species. The great variety of flowers and grasses helps to increase the total biodiversity. Many flowers support specific species of larvae. Ragwort plays host to the larvae of the cinnabar moth.



Bedstraw



Bird's foot trefoil



Creeping thistle



Fleabane



Orchid



Perforated St John's wort



Purple loosestrife



Purple vetch



Reedmace or bulrushes

Wild flowers in the Wetlands area (2)

Teasel has very small flowers, but these are loved by hover flies and bees and goldfinches eat their seed during winter. Water gathers in the interstices of the leaves and it is well armoured against any creature wanting to nibble or destroy it with its prickly stem and flower. The reeds growing around the lake become alive during the summer months with reed buntings and reed warblers.

Use the photos as a spotter guide and check for leaflets by the bird hide. If you are keen on spotting wild flowers, please get in touch and send us your photos.



Rosebay willowherb



Sneezewort



Ragwort with cinnabar
moth larvae



Tansy, vetch and yarrow



Yarrow, cinquefoil and
medick



Teasel and thistle



Hogweed with soldier
beetles



Toadflax



Meadowsweet

Walking on the Common

Spring and Summer are fantastic times to walk on the Common. The restoration of Wheatsheaf Common and the creation of all-weather footpaths, new planting, boardwalks and ponds provides attractive routes linking to Woodham Common, with its Bedser Trail and the Peace Garden. Two new pedestrian refuges have been built on the A320 providing safer crossing points.

Circular Walk via Bedser Trail and Wheatsheaf Common

The walk starts at the Bedser Trail Car Park on Monument Road, Woking , GU21 5LW.

The Bedser Trail on Woodham Common, is a 1.2 km easy access circular path and it is particularly suitable for people with mobility difficulties or buggies. There is a board walk in the wetter areas and several wooden benches. Look out for the Bronze Age tumuli, dating back 3,000 years. The largest can be spotted from the path, with heather growing over the mound.

From the Car Park, take the path to the right of the Bedser Twins information board. Follow the path as it winds through the trees until you come to a turning on the left on to a boardwalk.



Route 1—Bedser Trail loop

At this point you can follow the boardwalk round to the left passing a large open heather area, with the Basingstoke canal glimpsed through the trees on your right. Just before the path turns left again look out for the Bronze Age tumulus - seen as a mound a metre or so high rising out of the heather on your left. Follow the path back to the Car Park.

Route 2—Wheatsheaf Common loop



Ignore the path on the left and continue to follow the main path, more or less straight on, until you come to the busy A320, where a new pedestrian refuge has been installed.

Cross here onto Wheatsheaf Common. Once across the road you will see the newly landscaped area with a network of paths and boardwalks crossing the ponds.



Choose your own route around this space and return here at your leisure. When you are ready to return, cross the A320 again using the pedestrian refuge and retrace your steps to the Bedser Trail.

When you come to the boardwalk turning, now on your right, you can follow Route 1 back to the Car Park, or simply take the shortest route back the way you came!

To extend your walk further, you can visit the Peace Garden on the opposite side of Monument Road.

Following the restoration of the walls and chatri of the former Muslim burial ground, an Islamic inspired garden was created in 2015. The Peace Garden commemorates 27 Muslim Indian soldiers who died from fighting in the two world wars and who were originally buried here.

You are respectfully asked not to enter this garden of peace and contemplation with a dog.



Waymarked Circular Walk - Heather Farm to McLaren Park

7 km. Allow 90 minutes to 2 hours

There will soon be a waymarked circular walk to McLaren Park. Start by the information board next to the Heather Farm car park, passing 19 hawthorn trees which were planted either side of this path by conservation volunteers in 2022, to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II's platinum jubilee.

The path goes through Mimbridge and Bourne fields to the ford. Keep following the way markers into McLaren Park to the copse at the top of the hill, from where the view opens out and you can see the McLaren Technology Centre. There are picnic benches and the air is filled with the song of skylarks. Please stay on the paths to avoid disturbing ground nesting birds. The path leads out of McLaren Park into woodland and onto Sandy Track and the members' car park at the far end. From here it is a short walk back to Heather Farm. The walk has been carefully planned to avoid areas of ground nesting birds but also to include places of interest including the Sandpit.



Common Knowledge ...

What connects these local commons? -

- ◆ Littlewick Common
- ◆ Woodham Common
- ◆ Broomhall Common
- ◆ Pyrford Common

Geographically they are not connected but they are all owned and managed by Horsell Common Preservation Society.

The woodland either side of Pyrford Common Road was purchased by Horsell Common Preservation Society in 2007. These woods are all that remains of Pyrford Common. Following the Pyrford Act of Enclosure of 1815, much of the mediaeval common land was purchased or bought by the local wealthy landowners and in more recent years, developed for housing. There is a car park giving direct access to the woodlands, a playground and large field adjacent to the woodland, owned by Woking Borough Council. This is a good place for a family walk with many footpaths winding through the woodland. There are several different species of trees including sweet chestnut and mature oaks. One of these is called "The Shoe Tree"! The understorey has become overgrown with holly. In 2022, volunteer conservation working parties cleared some of the holly. There is an interesting walk to Woking Palace and the river Wey, Old Woking, passing through Hoe Bridge Golf course.



News from

Thames Basin Heaths Partnership

Spring is finally here! That means one thing here at the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership - it's the nesting season for heathland birds at Horsell Common and we're asking for everyone's help in keeping [#PawsOnPathsPlease](#). Thank you so much to everyone for keeping to the main paths from March to September, and an extra-big thank you to everyone who helps us spread the word. Please do tell all your friends and fellow visitors to Horsell Common, the birds that nest on the ground here lend a huge amount of protection to the Common, so it's in all our interests to make sure they're given space to raise their little families.

Many of the visitors we talk to at Horsell Common are dog walkers and we know you're a brilliant lot. So keep an eye out for our [#HeathlandHero](#) posts on social media, as we'll be celebrating all the fantastic things you do.

Posts will feature pooches that keep to main paths, or don't mind staying on their leads. Those whose owners always pickup and even pickup other people's rubbish. Pups that walk at Heather Farm or stick to the wooded areas during the nesting season, and so much more. Just a bit of fun and a thank you to all you caring people out there who do the right thing.

Do look out for news of all the free activities we put on. We offer free group dog walks via our Heathland Hounds Facebook group, also lots of free activities for kids and it'll be Heath Week again before you know it: we'll be running a week of events for all the family from Monday 24th to Sunday 30th July 2023.

Please do follow us on social media. We are on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at [@TBHPartnership](#). We share all our activities there, plus all sorts of news, ideas for places to walk locally, spotlights on other local heathlands and lots of wildlife.

Sarah Bunce

www.tbhpartnership.org.uk



HCPS Diary Dates

- ◆ AGM, Wed 4th October at 7pm, Goldwater Lodge, GU21 3RT
We are delighted that our guest speaker will be Lucy Lee, UK Chief Advisor, Conservation Programmes, WWF-UK
- ◆ Insect Walk with Andrew Halstead, July 26th 2 - 4pm (Heath Week). Please check www.horsellcommon.org.uk for booking details.

HCPS Membership

- ◆ Please ensure that your details are up to date. Go to www.horsellcommon.org.uk/membership and use your email address to log in.
- ◆ Refer to our website for current membership fees. If you would like to make a one-off donation this can be done via our new link on the website.
- ◆ If you are reading this and are not currently a member then do sign up to support our ongoing conservation and management of this amazing piece of Woking.

Stop Press

- ◆ Three adders have been sighted basking in the sun on the bare, warm soil of the one of the recently scraped areas.

Please be aware that adders will strike if suddenly disturbed!

- ◆ Reed beds have been planted in one of the large ponds of Wheatsheaf Common, not only for wildlife but also to filter sedimentation out of the water leaving the new ponds.



Exploring Horsell Common

