

Westcombe Woodlands Newsletter

Friends of Westcombe Woodlands
Autumn 2012 Issue No.1



Photo: Andrew Turvey

Mayor of Greenwich, Councillor David Grant and his wife Anne with Friends' Chair Tim Barnes

The next **VOLUNTEER DAYS** will be on Sunday 14, October and Sunday 2, December when we will be doing clearing, and then bulb and tree planting. For further details contact: westcombewoodlands@hotmail.co.uk

INAUGURATION DAY

This took place on June 16th and was attended by over 100 people, including the new Mayor of Greenwich, Councillor David Grant and his wife, Anne. There were refreshments provided as well as demonstrations of making nesting boxes and walks through to the glade area. Photographs were on display showing the work of the volunteers to date, and including photos taken of similar wild life

areas with ideas for the future of the woods. There was enthusiasm for what the Friends were seeking to achieve, and from many who had not previously visited the woodlands, or were even aware of its existence, surprise and delight at such a special place. It was a successful day and many of those who attended indicated an intention of becoming a Friend.

VOLUNTEER WORK UPDATE

The work has been concentrated in two areas, firstly the glade area at the lower end of the site on the Maze Hill side and secondly the strip of woodlands at the top of the site accessed via Lasseter Place.

There were four volunteer days in 2011 under the supervision of Trees for Cities in partnership with the Blackheath Preservation Trust (BPT). Over 90 individuals participated. Both areas were targeted. Footpaths were created and ivy, brambles, hops and young ash and sycamore were removed. Rock and log piles were created. The object was to provide

(Continue on page 3)

**Executive Committee
of the
Westcombe Woodlands**

Chair

Tim Barnes

Vice Chair

Frank Smith

Secretary (Hon)

Miriam Hier

Editor/Trustee

Denise Scott-McDonald

Trustees:

Carolyn Watkins

Don Albrecht

Chris Bates

Cllr. Alex Grant

Rob McCracken

The Society is to be registered
as a Charity with HM Revenue
& Customs (HMRC)



Photo: Frank Smith

Volunteer Day along the Lasseter Place side of the Woodlands

CHAIR'S LETTER

This is the first newsletter for the Friends of Westcombe Woodlands and it is hoped that we will provide them quarterly in the future. This inaugural edition is being sent to all who have expressed interest in the work of the Friends, including the large numbers of volunteers who have participated in our work days, and those who attended our inauguration day event in June.

We have applied to HM Revenue & Customs for registration as a charity qualifying for Gift Aid and when we receive that approval (which should be in about a month's time), I hope very much that you will then sign up as a Friend and that your subscriptions will begin to enable us to plan for the future. At present we are supported by the BPT, which through its subsidiary the BPT Woodlands Company owns the freehold of the woodlands. But I am anxious that the Friends organisation becomes financially self-sufficient, and although we will be pursuing grant applications, we will be dependent at first instance on subscriptions and personal gifts.

It is important that people realise that we are not seeking to change the unique wild nature of the woodlands, and to put to rest any anxieties that local people may have that it may be sacrificed by regular access to the public and to any type of municipalisation of the woods. We do not plan regular access. There may be one or two days a year when under supervision the public are invited in to see what is happening and to experience the diversity of the woods. There will be volunteer days of the kind which have worked well in the past 12 months in which we seek to clear, improve and plant different areas. We are working on a Management Plan which will be available to all members and on which we will welcome views.

We have an enthusiastic committee who are determined, with your help, to make these unique woods even more special.

Please support us by becoming a Friend. As soon as we have HMRC approval, we will write again with a membership form for you to complete.

By Timothy Barnes

Cont: Volunteer Work Update

more diverse and native trees and plants in the area. A long path was cleared through dense woodland to the glade where a large ancient pear tree was discovered. There was positive feedback from volunteers;

... 'I was amazed by how much positive impact a smallish group of people, well supervised, could make in a few hours.' 'I enjoyed it. It was good to see lots of enthusiastic people who care about their environment and makes me enthusiastic.' 'If people care about the woods, they will be better for wildlife, and more likely to be safe from Council or private attempts at development.' 'Very well organised, with good training on safety techniques.'...

In 2012 we have held five volunteer days in addition to our Inauguration event. These have been supervised by Don Albrecht, one of our trustees, who is a landscape architect with experience in

woodland management and environmental issues. Again they have been well supported, and by all age groups. Many children have enjoyed the experience of being in and exploring 'wild woodlands' and have found a variety of historic(?) artefacts, including an old bottle, pieces of porcelain, various items of clothing and many disconnected parts of a WC (query early 20th century Shanks).

The footpaths to the gladed area and from the top access point in Lasseter Close have been lined with strips of biodegradable carpet to prevent the re-emergence of the dense undergrowth which was there before. These strips are now well trodden in and the paths created are being lined with logs. We have planted the glade with hazel whips and bulbs, but there is much more to be done in this respect.



Photo: Alex Grant

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

It is important that access is made available from the Maze Hill Station side of the site. We cannot rely indefinitely on the goodwill of residents of Maze Hill Close to give us access from their rear gardens.

The trustees are actively considering two points of access, firstly from the land adjacent to Tom Smith Close, (the Council owned development alongside Maze Hill Station) and secondly from the far point of

the Car Park serving the Seren Park development. Once those arrangements have been finalised we will need to plot the route of the path (or steps) from this level to the level of the glade, and then clear the dense woodland which has invaded the lower part of the site. There is still a great deal of work to be done in the area around the glade. Fresh planting will be done as described in the Management Plan. There is the possibility

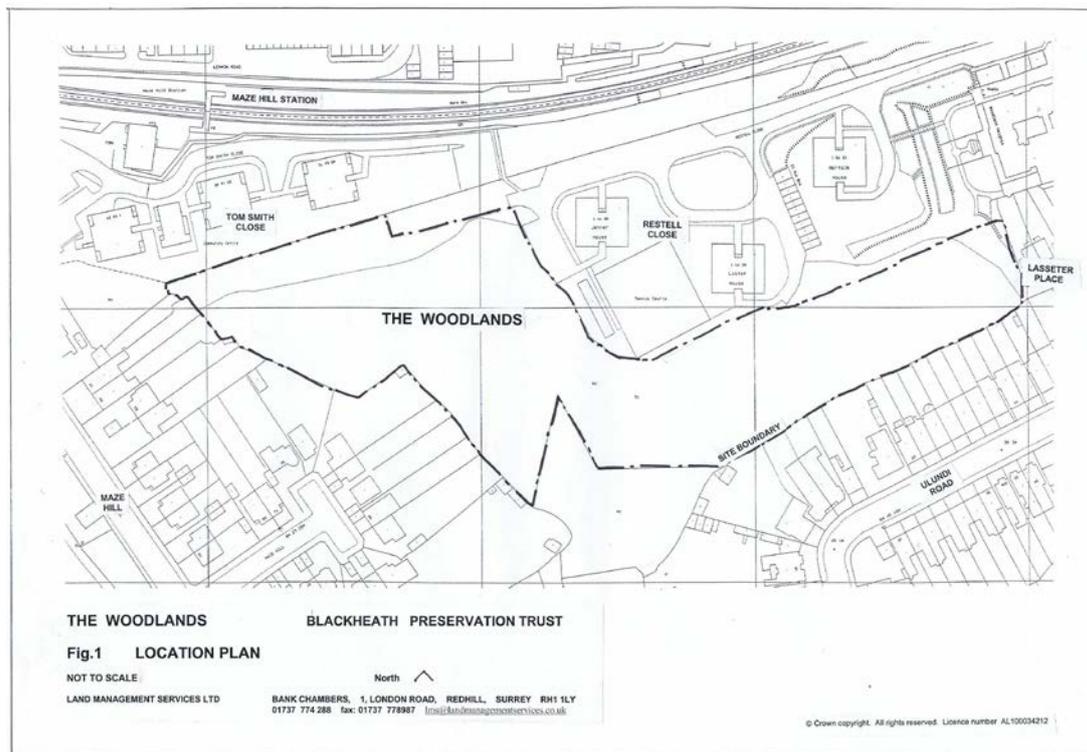
of constructing a pond to increase the levels of both flora and fauna. Bird and bat nesting boxes will be fitted to trees (one is already in place.) We plan to carry out a survey of the wildlife and the trees/shrubs/plants in the woods.

There will also be a need for regular maintenance of those areas which have already been cleared. Recent experience has shown how quickly the undergrowth re-asserts itself if not regularly cut back...

DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY OF THE WOODLANDS

The woodlands are 3.6 acres in size and are located to the south of Maze Hill Station. Until the 18th century there were substantial gravel workings on the site. The need for this arose from the fact that incoming ships to London Docks, having unloaded their cargoes, required ballast for the return journeys, and gravel ballast became a valuable commodity. Other parts of the woodlands were at one time used for market gardens and allotments. But the steep nature of the site, and the excavations left by the quarrying, activities fortunately prevented any building.

In the 20th century, the woods passed into the ownership of the Regional Health Authority. The new Seren Park development adjacent to the woods was originally a nurses' home. In 1982 the woods were acquired by the Blackheath Preservation Trust, which has a distinguished local history in preserving historic buildings (Blackheath Halls, Vanbrugh Castle and Boones Chapel are some examples). The BPT is now part of the Blackheath Society, a charity, and the ownership of the woods is vested in a subsidiary woodlands company.



The BPT has done what it can to ensure the maintenance of fencing to the woods at those parts where otherwise the public might have access. They have had the status and safety of the trees on the perimeters of the site regularly inspected by a tree surgeon with a view to pruning and felling where necessary. Insurance has been maintained. But over many years no clearing of the undergrowth and brambles, or planting or opening up the old footpaths through the site was attempted. The only legally approved access was and is at the top of the site at the end of Lasseter Close, and the strip of woodlands to which this gave entry was comparatively narrow, with the slope of the hill falling away sharply to the north. Alternative

permissive access has been provided by some residents whose land bounds the woodlands. The site is effectively surrounded by residential building, and one of the Friends' priorities is to facilitate access from the Maze Hill Station side which gives access to the lower and less steep part of the woods and, in particular, to the glade areas where many of our recent volunteer activities have been located.

In 2011 the BPT commissioned Trees for Cities, an environmental charity, to advise on the management of the woodlands and to set up and organise volunteer days with a view to clearing, opening up and improving part of the woods. At the same time the idea of a Friends organisation being set up was discussed with members of the Greenwich, Westcombe and Blackheath Societies, and with our MP and local councillors. There was general support for such an idea and in March of this year the Friends Organisation was formally set up and an Executive Committee (EC) was appointed. Apart from the object being for the public benefit there were the following three specific objectives:

- *To secure the preservation, protection and improvement of the area known locally as the Westcombe Woodlands, an urban woodland area immediately south of Maze Hill station in the Royal Borough of Greenwich*
- *To educate the public in the history, natural history, ecology and biodiversity of the Westcombe Woodlands, and to promote knowledge of and interest in the woodlands, and*
- *To promote high standards of conservation in the woodlands.*

The EC has been involved with the organisation of the volunteer days and the inaugural event in June. We have opened a bank account in the name of the Friends with Barclays and have applied for clearance from HM Revenue & Customs to enable us to take advantage of the Gift Aid provisions. We are working on a Management Plan, building on that prepared jointly by Trees for Cities and BPT. Hopefully a new chapter in the life of the Westcombe Woodlands is about to start.

MEMBERS OF THE EC

Chair - Tim Barnes

Tim has many years experience as chair of the Greenwich Society and lives locally in Crooms Hill. He is involved in other local amenity groups, being a trustee of the Greenwich and Bexley Hospice and chair of the St Alfege Restoration Appeal. He has had a long standing interest in the woodlands. In his spare time from local interests Tim continues to practice as a QC at the Criminal Bar!

Vice Chair - Frank Smith

Apart from a few years in the 1990s when he was working in Paris, Frank Smith (who is a chartered accountant) has lived in Blackheath since the late 1960s. He has been a director of the Blackheath Preservation Trust for eight years, the last three as chair. He is also on the board of The BPT Woodlands Company, which owns Westcombe Woodlands. Frank is vice chair of the Blackheath Society, having previously been chair for six years. He has served in the past as a governor of Brooklands Primary School, on the Committee of Management of Beaver Housing Society and as vice chair of the Geffrye Museum in Hackney.

Secretary (Hon) - Miriam Hier

Miriam has a background in biology and environmental management. She has a BSc in zoology from UCL and an MSc in aquatic resource management from King's London. She worked with the Environment Agency and helped to establish the environmental consultancy arm at King's. She is particularly interested in enhancing the ecological value and diversity in urban areas by creating valuable green spaces. Miriam recently worked for the Blackheath Cator Estate and now works in publishing and events.

Trustees - Carolyn Watkins

Carolyn moved to Blackheath in 1987, while studying architecture at Thames Polytechnic (now the University of Greenwich) and currently lives in Kidbrooke Park Road with her husband and two sons. She has been a director of The Blackheath Preservation Trust for over ten years and is also on the board of The Blackheath Preservation Trust Woodlands

Company, the freeholder of the Westcombe Woodlands. She is a trustee and active member of St Michael's Church, Blackheath Park, has recently joined the Parent Council at Brooklands Primary School and works at Morden College as an instructor in their Computer Sharing Centre, teaching computer skills to students age 65-95.

Trustees - Don Albrecht

Don is a landscape architect, moving to Greenwich in 1996 to study at Greenwich University. He's now a partner in Landscape Consultancy practice, Ireland-Albrecht, with offices in Greenwich town centre. Don is a Friend of East Greenwich Pleasaunce, member of the Greenwich Society and interested in developing the unique environment of the Woodlands.

Trustees - Chris Bates

Chris moved from rural Cheshire to Blackheath in 2000 and now lives in the new development Seren Park Gardens which immediately borders Westcombe Woodlands. He has a degree in Environmental Science and Chemistry with an additional HNC (Higher National Certificate) awarded from The Scottish Wildlife Trust in Habitat Surveying for Nature Conservation. In addition to the above Chris has been members of the environmental charities "Plantlife" and "Trees for Life" both for over 15 years. Currently he works for a Health & Safety consultancy in south west London.

Trustees - Cllr. Alex Grant

Alex Grant has been a Labour councillor for the Blackheath and Westcombe Park area since 1998. Alex chaired Greenwich Council's Planning Board between 2006 and 2010. Brought up in Westcombe Park, Alex attended Invicta Primary School, where he is now a governor. He has helped lead campaigns for better council housing, the restoration of the Gibb Memorial on the Heath, improvement to the Royal Standard area, and better railway services. Alex is a trustee of the John Roan Foundation, vice-chair of the Blackheath Joint Working Party, which monitors the Heath, and is on the committee of the Greenwich Housing Society, which provides housing to older people in Blackheath.

Editor/Trustee- Denise Scott-McDonald

Denise is a freelance journalist and lectures in journalism at South Bank University. She lives on Vanbrugh Hill and is involved with a number of local organisations. She is a governor at Halstow primary school, an active member of the Westcombe Society and is a reporter for the *Westcombe News*. Denise is also an executive member of the United Nations Association for Blackheath and Greenwich. Prior to moving to Greenwich in 2006, she worked as a reporter in New York and was a UN representative for a NGO at the United Nations. Denise was born and educated in south east London and moved to Greenwich to be close to her family.



Photo: Alex Grant

Note from the editor

I would like to make the Friends' newsletter as interesting and informative as possible. I would love to include letters and photographs from members. I would be happy to receive articles about the history of the woodlands or those who have early or childhood memories about the site. I am also open to receiving articles with suggestions about the kind of plantings which we should attempt, or things like the practicality and location of a wildlife pond.

A Friends' web-site is also being set up which will provide members and interested parties with information about what is happening and what is planned.

I look forward to seeing you at our future volunteer days.

By Denise Scott-McDonald