

Westcombe Woodlands Newsletter

Friends of Westcombe Woodlands
Spring 2014 Issue No.4



Chair's Letter

The volunteer days at the beginning of March, April and May were well supported and good progress was made in the glade, the mound area and in the opening up of the old path leading down to the place where the new gate will be established from the Seren Park Car Park. The bluebell clusters which we planted last year on the path to the glade are emerging strongly, and the fruit trees which we watered assiduously through last summer's drought (it seems a long time ago now!) are thriving. Hopefully we will have our first crop of apples and pears in the autumn.

The pattern of alternating volunteer days between the first Saturday and Sunday of each month seems to be working well, and most of us thoroughly enjoy the sessions, and are happy to pay the price of a few aches and pains in the afternoon! But it would be good to see more supporters at these sessions so I do hope that you will both come yourself and encourage others to come and join in.

I am keen to increase the membership of the Friends. Indeed it is one of the key objectives

The Friends of Woodlands Executive Committee

Cordially invite you
to a drinks reception
at

The White House
Crooms Hill
London SE10

12 noon – 2:00pm
Saturday 28th June
Details on page 2

for 2014 which you will see referred to later in the newsletter. It is the easiest thing to join us; just access the Friends website (www.westcombewoodlands.org) and join up straight away. It's cheap at the price but following the success of last year's summer party we offer a further inducement to join! We are planning to hold a similar event this summer as we did last year, a garden drinks party. This will be held on June 28th at The White House, Crooms Hill at lunchtime. All members of the Friends and their children will be welcome, but you must either be a "signed up" Friend, or join the Friends at the gate to be allowed in! (further details given later in the newsletter)

One of the initiatives that the Committee of the Friends is considering is limited and properly-supervised access to the Woodlands to one or two local primary schools for educational purposes. Such visits would be restricted in number - perhaps twice a year - and would need to be carefully prepared for and monitored. But the opportunity for a small group of children with their teachers to access such an exciting and informative location is one which we would seek to explore with a view to bringing it about.

But rest assured, it is not our intention to detract from the unique atmosphere of the woodlands with anything approximating to regular public access.

June 28th Friends Summer Party

We are holding this year's summer party at lunch-time (12pm onwards) at The White House at the top of Crooms Hill. All Friends and their families are welcome. There will be no charge - unless Friends are observed drinking more than three glasses of wine! - and children will be welcome. Could you let Tim know whether you will be coming so we can get an idea of how many to cater for? (tim@ttbarnes.com or 020-8858-1185)

Key objectives for 2014

These are the Friends' 10 key objectives for the current year. Hopefully by the time of our autumn newsletter we will be able to show that at least some of them have been achieved. They are not set out in order of priority.

1. Landscaping the end of the Lasseter Place path with a hide or a bench as the destination point.
2. Planting 20 new trees in addition to the whips which are currently being planted.
3. Commissioning a bat survey.
4. Extending the area of the glade and planting further trees, bird friendly shrubs and wild flower grass in the cleared areas.
5. Completing the path from the mound to the Seren Park Car Park gate.
6. Creating further bug hotels, and seeking in particular to attract stag beetles.
7. Bringing the membership up to 80 (currently 49).
8. Exploring the feasibility of a pond, planning its design and starting its construction, if feasible.
9. Developing ideas to attract wild-life to the woodlands.
10. Holding one or possibly two "open woodlands" days during the year to enable the wider public to see what we have achieved.

Progress of work done since last Newsletter



Our efforts have been primarily concentrated in the glade area. The fruit trees which we planted last year appear to be thriving. The ground around them has been sowed with grass and a wild flower mix and this is coming through, although it will need attention and weed extraction in the coming months. We have extended the area of the glade and planted a line of hazel whips along the

boundary towards Seren Park. Further clearance of bramble and nettles is in line for this summer and the outlines of the glade as a beautiful space in the middle of the woods is now emerging as a reality. The location of a pond has been established and we hope to embark on that project when the glade has been cleared and sowed. We have received a further Capital Clean Up grant for (among other items) the purchase of specimen trees to be planted in the glade.

The path to the glade has remained in good shape with the carpeting which we put down, marking the path and preventing the weeds growing through, but bedding down with a certain amount of earth and leaf mould on top. We have extended the path down to the mound where again we have done a good deal of planting of whips to stabilize the slope and to make it more attractive. The grass seed which we planted last autumn has substantially washed down the slope with the rains in February and will need to be re-done. We hope that the mound will become an attractive feature of the woodlands, particularly for the residents of Tom Smith Close who look out on it.

We have begun the task of clearing the path down to the Seren Park Car Park where we now have permission to install a new gate – the necessary legal document is under discussion with solicitors. This will become the principal access point to the woodlands for volunteers, the Fire Service (if access was required for them) and on the occasions of Open Days to members of the public. This final stretch of path is on a slope and will require some construction



work to make it safe and stable. Again we hope that, with the contribution from Capital Clean Up and a donation to the Friends, this will be achievable during the next few months.

Obviously the planting of bulbs and shrubs along the line of the path (similar to the bluebell planting on the path to the glade, see lower photo on page 3) is something we intend to do.

We have not neglected the Lasseter Place end of the woodlands (see upper photo on page 3). We have continued with the clearing of the path leading into the woods from the Lasseter Place gate. This has almost reached the point at which the woodlands fall away very steeply, and it is at that point that we hope to install a seat, and make it an attractive feature and destination within the woods. We have also planted some hazel, birch and aspen saplings and a volunteer has kindly donated some bluebell and wild garlic bulbs. The bug hotel and bird boxes, to which we have recently added, are fulfilling their purpose.

Volunteer days are always enjoyable. Good company and some hard work in a beautiful location make for an enjoyable three hours, particularly when you factor in the crucially important refreshment break! Hope to see as many as possible at our summer volunteer days. There is always work to be done.

Up-date on Seren Park access

As Friends will be aware we are committed to securing access to the woodlands from the Car Park attached to the Seren Park development, adjacent to Maze Hill Station. That initiative on our part is supported by the Fire Service which would need access to the woodlands in the event of fire.

The discussions with the owners of Seren Park and their bankers have not been altogether straightforward, but progress has now been made. The Blackheath Preservation Trust which owns the woods and the Seren Park owners have agreed in principle that BPT and the Friends should be granted an easement over the Seren Park Car Park to access the woodlands and to install a gate in the perimeter fence to allow such access. Such permission would extend to the emergency services and to those who were present with the knowledge and consent of the Friends, such as school groups or members of the public on Open Days. The final details of the legal document are being negotiated.

The Friends will be making a contribution to the costs of the legal work in drafting and finalizing the easement and paying for the cost of the gate which we hope to have installed by the autumn.

Hopefully by the time of the next Newsletter we will be in a position to report that both the gate itself and the path from the gate to the glade are operational.

Finances

There is presently a credit balance of just over £2,000 in the Friends' Bank Account with some subscriptions outstanding and with Gift Aid to be added in. We have recently received confirmation that our bid to the Mayor's Capital Clean Up Fund' has been accepted, (for the second year in succession). The £720 awarded will contribute substantially to the costs of additional tools, specimen trees and plants and the cost of landscaping and strengthening the path from the glade down to the new gate at Seren Park.

But we are not complacent on the financial front; the cost of creating a pond and purchasing a couple of good quality benches will have to be factored in to our budget, and our long term objectives includes a board walk from the glade to the Lasseter Place section of the woodlands, which would be an ambitious and expensive project. Fund-raising and grant applications will need to be a regular activity.

Annual General Meeting, 6th November 2013

This was held in the Old Royal Naval College and was attended by some 20 members as well as members of the Committee. The Chairman gave his Annual report, much of the content of which has been reflected in this or earlier copies of the Newsletter and will not be repeated here. But the Friends website was particularly commended and the relationship with the owners of the woodlands (ultimately The Blackheath Society) was described as working well.

The Treasurer provided his report and presented the accounts for the period ending 30th June 2013. The accounts were unanimously approved by the Meeting. The officers and the members of the Committee having indicated their willingness to continue to serve were all duly re-appointed. Since the AGM we are delighted that Nigel Duncan has joined the committee.

Questions from the floor raised the possibility of local primary schools having limited access to the woodlands, and this is an initiative which the Committee is taking forwards. However until we have the new gate from the Seren Park Car Park in place and the legal permission to access the woods from this point, there would be no safe access for children to the glade area, where such visits would be centred.

Nick Day from the Plumstead Common Environment Group, who was to have been our speaker, had to cancel and in his place we held a quiz which was much enjoyed. The victor was Howard Shields.

Bat Survey

In order to build on the regular bird survey we plan to conduct a bat survey at dusk on one of these summer evenings. We will have the help of Les Clark of the London Bat Group. When we have more details we will inform you through the volunteers' email list.



Meet our newest trustee Nigel Duncan

Nigel is a professor of legal education at City University London, where he trains barristers, and researches and writes about legal education and legal ethics. He lives in Vanbrugh Hill, having moved to this area a few years ago from the other side of Greenwich Park. As well as volunteering in Westcombe Woodlands he is a Friend of East Greenwich Pleasaunce and has, with others in 'Pip!' (Planting in the Pleasaunce), developed the community orchard there. He is a member of the Westcombe Society and the Blackheath & Westcombe

branch of the Labour Party. He has a long-standing interest in maintaining and improving the environment.

Volunteering in Westcombe Woodlands by Anne Raynsford

On a Saturday or a Sunday morning, what better to do than to set off to the Woodlands to work in the woods!

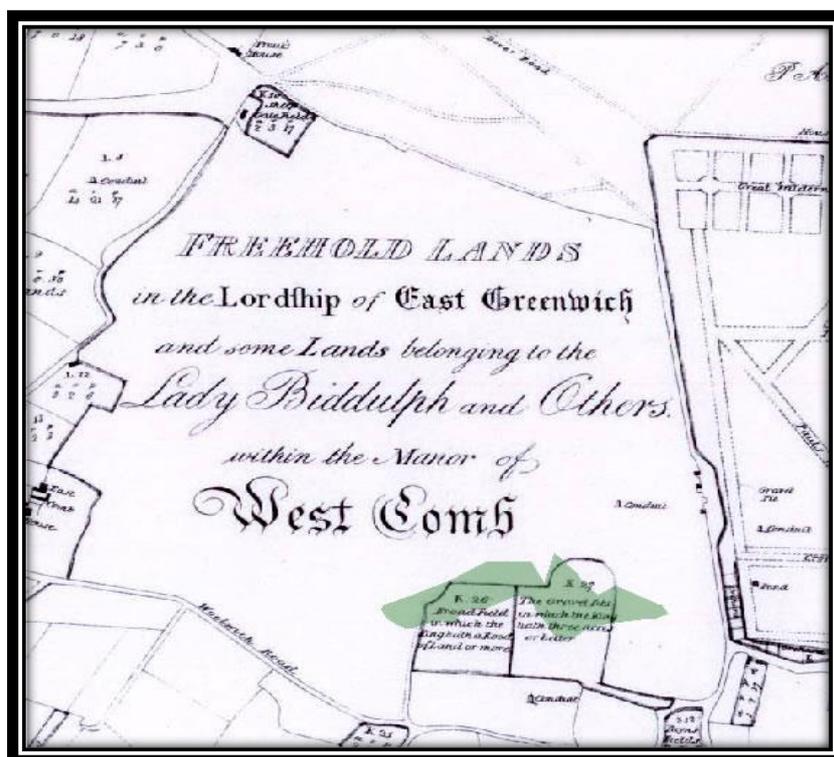
You can take your favourite tools, or use the ones provided; you can find a solitary patch or work with a group of jolly co-volunteers and chat about local goings on or gossip; you can labour till the sweat pours off your face, or you can retire from the front line and have a serious discussion about local politics; you can work very gently and carefully and hope you are doing the right thing.

The essence of it is that you are away from all traffic except the rumble of the train line. You are in woodland that has been more or less untouched for quite some time. The woods are extensive and give you the experience of working in a much larger space than any of us have as a garden. You feel that together with others, who have also chosen it as a preferred activity, you are contributing in a small way to the increased diversity of the woods, and managing them in a way that gives the possibility of more native flowering plants, and hence more insects, birds and small mammals than existed in its previously overgrown state. It's a lovely way to spend a few hours, to make some new friends, and to do some good.



History - The Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century by Alex Grant

The oldest known map of the area (see map below) is the 1695 “survey of the King’s Lordship, or Manor of East Greenwich”, by Samuel Travers, the Royal Surveyor (which has north at the bottom), and shows that the area now known as the Westcombe Woodlands was on the northern edge of the Manor of West Comb – which stretched as far south as the road junction known today as the Royal Standard and was bounded by Greenwich Park to the west, with enclosed fields to the east, lying roughly where Westcombe Hill is today.



Map of 1697: the oldest known map of the Westcombe Woodlands, showing gravel pits on the northern edge of the Manor of West Comb. Please note that north is at the bottom of this map. The road junction at the top left corner is nowadays the Royal Standard.

Part of the Westcombe Woodlands (just north of the Westcombe Manor boundary) is marked on the 1695 map as “The gravel pits in which the King hath three acres or better”, and just to the east of this, another parcel of land is the “Broad Field, in which the King hath a Rod of Land or more.” Local historian Neil Rhind argues that the “east side of much of Maze Hill was the site of gravel workings and lime burning pits” until the middle of the seventeenth Century, although it probably continued until the eighteenth century on the Westcombe Woodlands site itself. Gravel dug here was used as ballast for ships on long-distance voyages, as the docks and wharves of Greenwich were conveniently only a short distance away.

The earliest Westcombe Manor House is thought to have been somewhere near the modern junction of Foyle Road and Westcombe Park Road. The estate was first owned by the Ballard family (who had it granted to them by Richard II in the

fourteenth century), then by the Lambardes from 1552 until 1649, when the Lambardes (who were Royalist) had the estate sequestered by Parliament. It was then sold to Hugh Forth, a Mercer of London, who three years later sold it to Theophilus Biddulph, later made a Baronet.

Sixty years after that, at the start of the eighteenth century, the Biddulphs sold the Westcombe estate to Sir Gregory Page, who already had a large estate across the Heath called Wricklemarsh. His mansion was built there in 1723. It lasted barely 65 years, to be pulled down in 1787 and the site and park land eventually laid out for building over the next 40 years, to create what is known today as the Cator Estate. The Paragon was one of the first developments, erected over the years 1794 and 1805.

In 1725 Gregory Page granted a lease of about 40 acres of Westcombe Park to Captain Galfridus Walpole (brother of Sir Robert Walpole, who is generally regarded as the first Prime Minister of Great Britain). Galfridus died the following year. Henry Herbert, 9th Earl of Pembroke took over the lease and a substantial house, called Westcombe House, and was built by him in 1728. It stood on a site between today's Humber Road and Coleraine Road. Marked now by Peachum Road it was demolished in 1854, twenty years before the railway was built a few hundred yards to the north.

A view of the House painted by George Lambert from the west-southwest in about 1740 shows the surrounding area to the west of Westcombe House – now occupied by the eastern part of the Westcombe Woodlands and the houses of Foyle Road and Vanbrugh Hill – to be rolling parkland with groves of trees. At some point in the eighteenth century, a north-south roadway along the course of what is now Vanbrugh Hill (then called Love Lane, Green Lane and Conduit Lane) began to be used, though no houses were built on it until the mid-nineteenth century and it seems to have functioned until then as a boundary between the parkland of Westcombe House to the east, and the gravel pits on what is now Westcombe Woodlands to the west.

Until the eighteenth century, the area around the Westcombe Woodlands was entirely undeveloped – Greenwich was still just a small village. In 1695 it would have been possible to walk all the way from the gravel pits northwards to the river through fields, admiring the Queen Anne and King Charles blocks of the new Royal Hospital rising up out of the fields on your left (the rest of the ensemble, the King William and Queen Mary quarters, would not be built in the early eighteenth century).

Vanbrugh Castle was built by its owner the playwright and architect, Sir John Vanbrugh, in 1719, along with a number of other buildings for his wider family on and around what is now Vanbrugh Fields and Westcombe Park Road.