

Westcombe Woodlands Newsletter

Friends of Westcombe Woodlands
Summer 2015 Issue No.6



Chair's Letter

We are making good progress in all three of the areas where volunteer activities have been concentrated. At Lasseter Place the saplings, wild garlic and bluebells which we planted along the path have taken well. The brambles and nettles have been kept at bay, (largely through the efforts of Clive Corlett, a local and very active Friend of the Woodlands,) and the bug hotel, made out of rubble and old pieces of sanitary ware discarded by the residents of Ulundi Road, is beginning to welcome new residents.

The glade area is now starting to resemble what we have long hoped for. The fruit trees, including new ones, (but old stock!) which we have recently planted, have taken well and showed quite good blossom. The wild flowers planted last autumn, in the mother of all downpours, have established well to one side of the glade, and we have cleared part of the central area with a view to re-seeding with a mix of meadow grass and wild flowers in the autumn. The Friends have now invested in a scythe, but even after the inspiring example of Ross Poldark in *Poldark*, the recent new TV series, we do not have a good scyther in our ranks. Perhaps one of the readers of the newsletter will turn his/her hand to it.

The mound and the path down to the new gate from the Seren Park Car Park have also received attention. The mound now looks as it has been a part of the woodlands since time immemorial. The number of sycamore seeds which have rooted on the soil and need to be removed is extraordinary. The saplings planted on the slopes of the mound have taken well. We have begun on the clearance of the path down to the Car Park

The Friends of Woodland Executive Committee

Cordially invite you
to a drinks receptions
at

The White House
Croome Hill
London SE10

12 noon – 2:00pm
Saturday 13th June
Details on page 2

but it is hoped that we might be able to call on the services of some able bodied young people in a City firm who have been approached with a view to their assisting with the construction of the path, using ex railway sleepers for the steps, as part of their community involvement programme.

I hope as many of you as possible will come to the summer party here at The White House on June 13th. We already have a good number of acceptances, but the more the better. Tell me that you are coming, either on 020-8858-1185 or by e-mail on tim@ttbarnes.com

Tim Barnes

June 13th 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)

Status Of The Discussions With The Woodland Trust

The Friends will know what is proposed, namely the transfer of the freehold of the woodlands from the BPT Woodland Co Ltd (owned by the Blackheath Society) to the Woodland Trust and then a long lease from the Woodland Trust to the Friends. This has the twin advantage of vesting the ownership of the woodlands in a well-regarded charity which will ensure that it remains as an area of woodlands for the future while giving us the opportunity of maintaining and improving them, and preserving their unique quality.



The legal wheels are turning, albeit rather slowly. Firstly the Friends had to be legally re-constituted as a CIO, (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) with the Charity Commission. Then the terms of the lease have to be agreed. They effectively place on the Friends full responsibility for the woodlands, their insurance, upkeep and policies for keeping them private except for volunteer days, a couple of open days a year when the gate is in place and occasional and supervised visits from a local primary school. The rent will be a peppercorn a year (hopefully, home grown when we have planted pepper!).

The legal costs of both the Friends and the Woodland Trust in relation to the lease are being borne by the Friends, while the costs of the transfer of the freehold are being carried by the BPT Woodland Company. That company having divested itself of the freehold of the woodlands will no longer have any responsibility, financial or otherwise for the woodlands.



Hopefully by the time of the next newsletter the legal documentation will be complete. We hope and expect the continued support from the Woodland Trust and it will be good to have a body like that which we can look to for advice on aspects of woodland management, if we need it.

Frank Smith

Charitable Incorporated Organisation



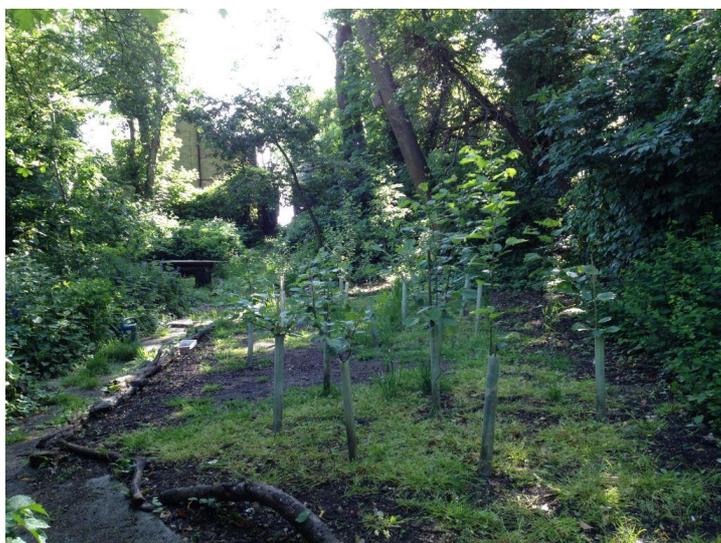
The Friends are now registered with the Charity Commission as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation. That was a pre-condition to our entering into the lease with the Woodland Trust, and in any event was considered by the Committee to be the right way forwards.

The objects of the Friends as defined in our new constitution are as follows, “ to promote for the public benefit the conservation, protection and improvement of the area known locally as the Westcombe Woodlands... by managing the woodlands in accordance with good woodland management and to advance the education of the public in the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment of Westcombe Woodlands and their history, natural history, ecology and biodiversity “

The Charity Commission web-site describes a CIO as the organisation to opt for if “you want your charity to be a corporate body and have a wider membership including voting members..” We will have to maintain a register of members and trustees and send our accounts and an annual return to the Charity Commission each year. We will also need to close the existing Friends organization and bank account and to re-constitute as a CIO. There will be no alteration to the organization or activities of the Friends, and the Committee will keep members posted as to the developments, such as the need to change standing orders to the new bank account and to sign fresh Gift Aid declarations.

If any member wants to see our new constitution it is accessible on the Charity Commission web-site. Our registered Charity Number is 1161352

Progress Of Work Done Since Last Newsletter



Our efforts have now attracted the attention of the local press! In the *Mercury* on 29th April our labours were recognised under the headline, “Caring for hidden gem, Volunteers spruce up site,” by reporter Katharine Kerr.

It read as follows,
“Volunteers have been hard at work sprucing up one of Blackheath’s best kept

secrets. The Friends of Westcombe Woodlands are working to enhance the green oasis south of Maze Hill Railway Station which has seen years of neglect... For the past four years, the Friends groups has been planting saplings, wildflower seeds and clearing brambles, and have cleared a glade to encourage wildlife with the aim of attracting brimstone butterflies.

Frank Smith, the vice-chairman of the group, told the *Mercury*: “As it’s surrounded by housing, the woods are almost unknown to the general public. We’ve been opening up paths, introducing native trees and wild flowers and creating an orchard. We’ve also put up bird and bat boxes and carried out bird and bat surveys.”

He explained the site had survived in spite of the adjacent developments since the 1840s due to its steep incline... The group is working with schools on some supervised visits to enable youngsters to explore its wildlife.”

To put some more flesh on that précis, we have planted additional buckthorn whips in the hawthorn hedge between the glade and the Seren Park development. These whips are particularly attractive to the brimstone butterfly as well as producing

autumn colour. Our investment in a scythe will soon be put to the test. Much of the glade is covered by vigorous meadow grass which we will be cutting in the next few weeks. But ubiquitous weeds including brambles and nettles have to be regularly removed. We have cleared of weeds the other parts of the glade prior to seeding it with meadow grass in the autumn. We have planted four more fruity trees in the glade of old varieties and have watered and cleared back the weeds and undergrowth from around the existing fruit trees, all of which are fine.

Most of the wild flowers which we planted in a deluge in the winter have taken well, and the glade is now shaping up to be the beautiful place which we hoped for. Although we will be holding an Open Day in October for the public, it is hoped that the readers of this newsletter will attend one of the volunteer days before then. There is no substitute for being in a lovely place, with some like-minded people working to improve the environment for a couple of hours, and there is free coffee, tea and chocolate biscuits.

There has been work done on the path down from the glade to the Seren Park car park. It still requires a great deal of work done so as to stabilize the track, using railway sleepers to create steps. There is a chance of recruiting some volunteers from one of the large City law firms to assist in this task. But at least you can now see the path of the track, and it is not overgrown or as dangerous as it was. The installation of the gate is a major development in that it now permits access to the glade and lower part of the woodlands which is now dependent on the good-will of the residents of Maze Hill. We hope that by the Open Day in October the track from the gate to the woodlands will have been completed and access made easier, and suitable, by way of example, for schoolchildren on supervised visits.

The mound looks as it has been part of the woodlands since time immemorial. Soe of the saplings which we planted have taken well but are far out-numbers by the large number of sycamores which seed everywhere and which have to be pulled out all the time. The plan is to grass the mound in the autumn.

The Lasseter Place end of the woodlands benefits from the attentions of one of our Friends who lives next door. But the work we did last autumn has paid dividends. There is a winding path with saplings of various types planted along the margins and wild garlic and bluebells. We hope to clear the far point of this path with a view to installing a bench, preferably made from some felled timber in the woodlands.



There is a need to do more major work to some of the trees backing on to the Ulundi Road gardens which will involve the attention of our tree surgeon. That is why we need to maintain our financial position to cover such costs, as well as costs such as the lease with the Woodland Trust. Unfortunately we did not succeed with our Capital Clean Up grant this year, after two successful years bids, but we have the resources to cover anticipated expenses

Volunteer Dates For The Remainder Of The Year.

According to our established practice we intend to alternate the volunteer dates on the first Saturday and Sunday of each month. For the remainder of the year the dates are as follows, 4th July, 2nd August, 5th September, 4th October, 7th November and 8th December.

We will let you know in the week before the volunteer date where it is to take place and where we are to gather. Details will also be found on the Friends web-site

The New Gate

In December 2014, the BPT Woodlands Co Ltd (ultimately owned by the Blackheath Society) entered into a licence agreement with the owner of the freehold of the Seren Park residential development - next to Maze Hill station - to install a secure gate in fencing between the woods and the car park of the flats. The gate was installed in May, now provides a much-needed second access point and will in time lead to better pedestrian movement within the woods.



The costs of the gate's manufacture and installation are being shared between BPT and the Friends.

It will make it much easier for volunteers to work in the lower part of the woods and in time will provide a safe route up to the Glade. There is much work to be done to install the necessary steps and to clear and restore the old route leading up to the back of Maze Hill and the Glade.

This will involve clearing vegetation and making the route more stable and pedestrian-friendly – lots for volunteers to do!

When that is all done, we plan to hold an Open Day on Sunday 4 October for you to get to know the woods better and to see what's been achieved in recent times. You might like to note the date now but it is subject to the progress we are able to make on the path over the summer. More details nearer the time.

History - The Nineteenth Century by Alex Grant

As the eastern side of Maze Hill became more built up from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, access to the Woodlands area had to be obtained from the lane (now Vanbrugh Hill) to the east. Neil Rhind guesses that authorised gravel digging may have stopped in the later eighteenth century, when there is evidence that flatter parts of the site was in use for kitchen gardens and small holdings.

After Vanbrugh Castle was built, other houses followed on the north east side of Maze Hill, leading towards the river (see Map 1). The substantial Maze Hill House, which had its origins as early as 1718 but much enlarged in the early nineteenth century and demolished in 1934, stood on the site of what the present Nos 69-105 Maze Hill, and some of its pleasure grounds were taken for the cul-de-sac.



Map 1 1837: The distinctive zig-zag shape of the modern Westcombe Woodlands is already apparent, as field boundaries. More houses have been built on Maze Hill and on the rural lane that would later become Westcombe Park Road. Please note the green shaded

Parish records survive for 1843, allowing us to identify exactly who owned the parcels of land now known as the Woodlands. The eastern half and a slither of land along its northern edge (near where Tom Smith Close now stands) and identified as “Unoccupied Plantation”, was then owned by the trustees of Morden College (see Map 2). The College – today a home for the elderly retired – was established in 1695-1700 by Sir John Morden as a refuge for merchants down on their luck through no fault of their own. It sits on the south eastern corner of Blackheath, and to this day the trustees still control large tracts of land in East Greenwich and on the Greenwich Peninsula.



Map 2 1843: Vanbrugh Hill is still an undeveloped country lane. The numbers on each plot of land on this tithe map can establish who owned the site in the early Victorian days. Please note the green shaded area shows the current boundaries of the Westcombe

of Westcombe House from 1829 to 1843. So even in those days, the Woodlands were a largely forbidden area to the rear of rich people's private homes and stoutly fenced against undesirables and trespassers.

Some of the western part of the Woodland was in the leasehold of Mrs Anne Collins, widow of Edward, the owner of Maze Hill House – it appears to have been garden land related to Maze Hill House itself. The area to the south of the Woodlands (some in the grounds of Vanbrugh Castle), contained a pond and was part of the estate of a large house (demolished in 1854) just to the east of Vanbrugh Castle. Known as the Red

House it was owned by Thomas Brocklebank, owner of Thames river steamboats and the lessee