

# Westcombe Woodlands Newsletter

Friends of Westcombe Woodlands  
Autumn 2013 Issue No.3



*Volunteers in the glade preparing for sowing.*

*Photo by Nick Mountfield*

## **CHAIR'S LETTER**

We have made good progress with clearing the glade and planting the fruit trees and the grass and wild flower mix. Those of you who remember it in its jungle phase would be surprised and delighted to see it as it now is. This has been possible only through the hard work of volunteers (clearing the ground, and then clearing it again and again!), planting the fruit trees and watering them during the summer months and then preparing the ground for the sowing of the grass and wild flower mix. You can read more of the detail in this newsletter under the heading Volunteer Activities.

Towards the bottom of the woodlands we have been preparing the mound of soil which came from a neighbour's garden, for sowing with grass and wild flowers. (We have invested heavily in this mix so we are in a position to plant it in other areas, probably on the Lasseter Place path.) The mound has bedded down over the last few months and will in due course be an attraction for the woodlands in place of the vertical, nettle and bramble infested slope which was previously there.

*Please join us for the first*

## **AGM**

of the Friends  
on

6<sup>th</sup> November at 7.30 pm

Room QA075,  
Queen Anne's Court,  
The Old Royal Naval College.

After formal business, our guest  
speaker will be,  
Nick Day, Chairman of the  
Plumstead Common  
Environment Group.

At the Lasseter Place end of the woodlands we have continued with the clearing of the path along the top edge of the woods, and hope to embark on bulb planting in the autumn. Some, at least, of the bird boxes have been in occupation in the summer with the result that they will need clearing out before winter.

I am still keen to increase the membership of the Friends and it would be much appreciated if those who read this newsletter could seek to engage a friend or neighbour to join us. With an effective web-site providing details of membership, it is an easy task to enrol, and for the cost of a round of drinks (or half a round) I hope you agree that the annual subscription is reasonable.

*Tim Barnes*  
Chair

### **Drinks party**

This party was held at The White House, Crooms Hill on June 8<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the emergence of the Friends of the Woodlands and the recruitment of the first tranche of some 30 Friends. It was an enjoyable occasion with some 25 people present. There is no diminution to our funds in that the drinks were paid for by a couple of members of the Committee!

We hope to make this an annual fixture on the basis that we otherwise only meet when there is work to do on our volunteer days. Despite Franks' provision of orange juice and chocolate biscuits, (Frank Smith Vice-Chair and Treasurer of the Friends), and Tim's determination to have elevenses from an early stage in the morning's activities, those short breaks should not be the totality of our social life as Friends!

### **Capital Clean-Up Grant**

Through the efforts of Joe Beale (our bird survey expert) we were successful in obtaining an award of £680 from the Mayor's Capital Clean Up Fund in the late Spring. This has been utilized in part to buy tools and equipment, and nest boxes and in part to buy the fruit trees planted in the glade and the mix of grass and wild flowers which we are in the course of sowing.

### **Annual General Meeting**

The first AGM of the Friends will take place on the evening of 6<sup>th</sup> November at 7.30 pm in Room QA075 in Queen Anne's Court in the Old Royal Naval College. We are grateful to the University of Greenwich for allowing us to use the space without charge. The formal part of the meeting, (Chair's Report. Treasurer's Report, and the election of officers), should only take about 30 minutes.

Nick Day the Chairman of the Plumstead Common Environment Group, has then agreed to address us. Nick is a well-established actor and good company.

So he should be an entertaining speaker. Some of you will have seen the extent of land for which the PCEG is now responsible and how well they have acted as custodians of it. They have also been very successful in fund-raising. So we have a lot to learn from their experience.

By definition an AGM only comes once a year, so we do hope that there will be a good turn-out on 6<sup>th</sup> November. Put the date and time in your diaries. We will arrange for the Porters Lodges at both sides of the Naval College to give instructions as to how to reach QA075

### **Seren Park and Access to the Woods**

As we reported in the last newsletter the best access to the woodlands is from the car park by the Seren Park development, and this is supported by the local fire service. Negotiations over arranging such access, (at no cost to the owners of Seren Park), have been complicated by the fact that not only do we have to engage with the developers but also with the Bank which helped to fund the development. But we are making progress. The Bank in principle sees no problem with a tennis court type gate in the wire fence at the end of the car park. This would only be used on open days or for access on the monthly volunteer days where work is being concentrated in the glade and the lower part of the woodlands.

It is a moot point whether we will have finished the path down from the glade to the car park before the consents come through. But hopefully by the time of the next newsletter we will have achieved the joint aims of the path being completed and it connecting with a gate in the fence.

### **Planting**

We have planted 500 bluebells (traditional English and not Spanish!), along the path to the glade in four separate areas. (see photo on page 8). Hopefully they will become established and colonise the adjacent areas.

The glade and the mound have been sown with a combination of meadow mix, (involving wild flowers and wild grasses), and meadow grass. Volunteers cleared the areas concerned. The seed was mixed with sand and volunteers trod the seed in. The mix came from the Wild Flower Shop. Don't expect instant results. Their literature explains, "You won't see a display of flowers in the first year... Most of the perennial varieties will spend the first year building up their leaf growth and root structure.' We will have to wait until 2015 until (hopefully) we see the fruits of our labours.

### **Volunteer Days**

We have followed the pattern of alternating the first Saturday and Sunday of the month consecutively. The numbers vary, but we average about 10-12 volunteers each time.



*Planted fruit trees and the remains of a large laurel bush removed from the glade.*

In the glade we have been concerned with clearing the area where the fruit trees have been planted. Watering the trees has been carried out during the summer months, and the space between the trees prepared for sowing with wild flower seed and meadow grass. The large laurel bush in the centre of the site has been cut down and its roots treated. The sowing has now been done and we await germination within the next month or so. The plan is to clear more of the area of the glade, and to plant bulbs, shrubs and whips, such as the hazel whips planted last year, many of which have survived. The path to the glade from the bottom of 77 Maze Hill garden has been planted with 500 bluebells in four specific locations. Hopefully they will colonise and spread. The path itself is still based on the underlay carpet which we put down more than a year ago. That has been very effective. It has suppressed the weeds and with the underlay now covered with leaves and earth, it looks like a natural path.

The volunteers have begun creating a path down from the glade to the Seren Park car park. There was definitely a path in this location historically, but it has become totally overgrown and it has been a major effort clearing and cutting back the undergrowth. We are probably about half way there, although there will be a need to restore and build up parts of the path where it is on too steep an incline.

The mound has been prepared for sowing and sowed with the mix of grass and wild flowers. What appeared at one time as a rather stark and monumental mound has now bedded down and we are confident it will be an attractive feature of the woodlands when our work is completed. The area on which the mound has been located was a comparatively sheer piece of hill-side with scrubby undergrowth on it, and no redeeming features. We obtained expert advice that there was no badger sett in the affected area, before permitting the mound to be created.





*The bug hotel at Lasseter Place*

At the Lasseter Place end of the woods, our space is more confined. We are constructing a path along the top edge of the woodlands, and the photograph shows the brilliant 'bug hotel' which has been created in this area from various pieces of scrap which we found. We have also put up a number of bird boxes in the trees and cut back the undergrowth on both sides of the path. Planting bulbs will be a task for the next volunteer day.

We hope to thin out some of the sycamores which have taken over much of the woodlands and to replace them with a variety of broad leaved trees. The idea of a pond is still on-going. We will be preparing a plan for 2014 which we hope to circulate early in the New Year setting out our proposals for the woodlands and how and when we hope to achieve them. We will also provide a calendar of volunteer days for the New Year. Our next volunteer day is Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> November, but there will not be a volunteer day in December.

Please keep posted via our web-site and put the volunteer days in your diary.

### **Finances**

In the 18 months since we came into existence, our income has comprised of a combination of Friends' subscriptions, donations and grants, this seems likely to continue in the future.

As HM Revenue & Customs have recognised us as a charity, we can claim Gift Aid on donations and subscriptions received.

We now have over 40 signed-up Friends. As most of them are joint or family memberships, we are approaching 100 individuals – very good progress from a standing start. We have nine life members. Of our income so far of just over £2,500, more than half is accounted for by subscriptions.

Earlier this year, we were awarded a grant of £680 under the Mayor of London's Capital Clean-Up scheme and we spent this on vital tools for our volunteer work; and seeds, bulbs and bird-boxes to improve the biodiversity of the woodlands.

We spent £235 on the apple and pear trees planted in the spring. All have survived and we hope to harvest some fruit from our orchard next year! A statement of income and expenditure for the period ended 30 June 2013 will be presented at the AGM.

### **Achievements of the Friends to date**

- 1 Drafting and adopting a Constitution for the Friends and establishing an Executive Committee with officers in place to organise the running of the organisation.
2. Putting the finances of the Friends on a secure footing and obtaining HMRC recognition as a charity, enabling Gift Aid to be claimed.
3. Organising volunteer days and clearing the glade prior to planting apple and pear trees (old English varieties), meadow grass and wild flowers; as well as constructing a 'bug hotel' inside the Lasseter Place entrance.
4. Preparing a detailed Management Plan for the woodlands.
5. Holding a summer party for new members (we hope this will become an annual event).
6. Securing a grant from the Mayor of London to fund the acquisition of tools, bluebell bulbs, wildflower seeds and nest boxes.
7. Negotiating with the owners and bankers to the Seren Park development with a view to installing a gate to lead to the path we are constructing from that point the car park to the glade.
8. Launching a Friends website, including a history of the woodlands researched and written by a Committee member.
9. Liaising with other organisations and individuals about woodland management, badger protection, bird life surveys and other aspects of the Friends activities.
10. Maintaining good relations with the Blackheath Society (the ultimate owners of the woodlands) and local stakeholders.

This is not intended as an exhaustive analysis of what we have achieved but gives an indication as to how we are seeking to move the Friends forwards.

### **More about the History**

Alex Grant, one of our committee member and a history enthusiast, has written quite extensively about the colourful history of the woodlands, which is now all on our web site at [www.westcombewoodlands.org/history/](http://www.westcombewoodlands.org/history/). In the first issue of our Friends' newsletter you got to read about how the site was a gravel pit, market garden and allotments. Online you can learn even more; including how the site was sequestered by Parliament, the building of Vanbrugh Castle by the playwright and architect, Sir John Vanbrugh, and how the location was a popular suicide spot during Victorian times. Below is an excerpt of what is online, plus this photograph from 1906.



*The Westcombe Woodlands can be seen on the right of this 1906 view from one of the chimneys of the newly-built Greenwich Power station. Trafalgar Road is in the foreground, with Maze Hill station beyond and the woodlands immediately to the south. In the distance can be seen Shooter's Hill. The white building on the upper edge of the Woodlands (and which is shown in the inset) is Woodlands House, which was demolished 20 years later and whose site is now occupied by the modern houses of Lasseter Place (courtesy Blackheath Society)*

“One of the lost parts of Greenwich is the six and a half acres of wooded scarp land stretching from Vanbrugh Hill on the east to Maze Hill on the west, sitting under Ulundi Road, Vanbrugh Castle and Westcombe Park Road.

A modern map of the Westcombe Woodlands shows it is surrounded on all sides by development: by the semi-detached and terraced houses of Ulundi Road, Vanbrugh Hill and Maze Hill to the south, east and west, and Maze Hill station and the modern blocks of Tom Smith Close and Seren Park to the north.



But before the mid-nineteenth century the area was largely rural. As the surrounding area got developed from the 1840s onwards, the Westcombe Woodlands escaped development, partly because the old gravel pits on the site had left the ground far too steep to be built on. The slope on the site would previously have been much more gentle. As Neil Rhind puts it in his *History of Blackheath Village and Environs* (1986) *"its steep slopes and uneven terrain was created by man only as recently as the middle of the 17th Century, if not shortly before"*. If it had not been for these gravel pits, the land would surely have been developed just as the rest of the Westcombe Park area was from the 1860s onwards.

Before the mature trees on the site grew up when the gravel pits were abandoned, probably in the late eighteenth century, the area may have looked a bit like the area of old gravel pits (known locally as "The Dips") just off Charlton way at the northern edge of Blackheath, a half-mile to the south of the Westcombe Woodlands. Other parts of the Westcombe Woodlands were occupied by formal gardens, allotments and orchards, and a substantial house stood at the eastern end of the Woodlands until it was demolished in the early twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, the land was even notorious as a suicide spot. (guess how?) So the Woodlands are probably wilder and more inaccessible now than they have ever been for several hundred years."



*Volunteers planting bluebells in the glade. Photo by Frank Smith*