

Friends of Farnham Park

News Sheet March 2007

Registered Charity No. 285383

INTRODUCTION

When at a recent Waverley meeting a Councillor asked the nature of FOFP, he was advised, "my understanding is that FOFP is essentially a volunteer organisation which was set up originally to help in the management of the Park. I think it originally stemmed because Waverley was historically receiving a number of criticisms or concerns about the Park from interested people, and the way to deal with it was to try and create a group to focus those concerns; and I understand that's what this group does".

I think some Friends might say that there's a little more to it than that, but regardless, as the Park is still here in fine fettle and retains much of its historic glory, it's fair to claim that over the decades the Friends have done their job. Our valued part-time Ranger Ron Hills has stewarded the Park well with limited resources and the help of a dedicated core of the Friends' conservation volunteers. As funding becomes available for the Council's Restoration and Management Plans, the longer-term issues of the loss of trees, habitats and scrub-invasion can hopefully be addressed.

With the Park only hitting the news every few hundred years or so, it's all too easy to forget just how lucky we are. Over the past 600 years it has been the hunting ground of bishops and kings, the site of a minor civil war battle, and - as the excitement of the recent discovery of a 17th century saw-pit has confirmed - even a building site, complete with Carollian graffiti and cup-holders. (See *Events, June 7th*).

Being a Grade II Listed 'Historic Park and Garden', a (proposed) Local Nature Reserve, a 'Site of Nature Conservation Importance' and with restrictive Covenants in place, the Park benefits from a good degree of protection. Nevertheless, it is always useful to be reminded that our valuable heritage mustn't be taken for granted.

WATCHING THE GRASS GROW

The Park's southern slopes are Waverley's only example of chalk grassland habitat, so plans are afoot to enhance the biodiversity by extending the harebell patch. Come the summer, please don't complain that Waverley have forgotten to mow the grass, because it's an ecological experiment! Paths will be cut for access as required, and it will be mowed annually in September with the arisings removed. Hopefully wildflowers will set

seed, and from the wide diversity of plants found in the sward a pleasant herb-rich habitat should develop for wildlife and visitors to enjoy. Watch this space!



BAPS AND HAPS

The Restoration Plan seeks to implement the Surrey Biodiversity Partnership's 'Wood Pasture & Parkland Habitat Action Plan' (HAP) for the Park, an important part of their Biodiversity Action Plan. The HAP provides an interesting appraisal of the importance of Farnham Park on an international level:

"Lowland wood pasture and parkland is identified as a UK 'priority' habitat.

"Ancient trees tend to inspire us and give us a feeling of awe. This is not surprising, the time they span in one lifetime can take us back beyond our own family trees - few of us know our history for 30 generations. They also span time back to the primaevial forest or wild wood. An old oak may well be only three generations from the original wild wood and it and its acorns and seedlings are therefore of great interest genetically. Britain is responsible for the majority of Europe's ancient trees, Spain being the only other European country still to have a significant number of ancient trees.

"Butler (2001) states that our heritage of ancient trees and old growth wood pasture is one of the greatest contributions of biodiversity and culture that we can make in Europe."

RON HILLS MSc.

Hearty congratulations are due to our Ranger, having obtained his Masters in Environmental Management last year in his spare time. His chosen thesis was the ancient trees of the Park, so we can have confidence in the knowledge that we have an accredited expert on site. (See *Events, April 19th*)

RESTORATION OF VIEWS

Historic views of the Castle and Keep from the main entrance and cricket ground areas are set to be restored this year by cutting keyholes in the woodland. This will recreate the physical connection between the Park and the Castle. We are assured that it has been carefully planned to give the maximum effect from removing the minimum of trees, and with the formalities progressing well, we hope

this visually important part of the Restoration Plan will be completed soon after the bird nesting season ends.

CHEWING THE CUD

Efforts will soon be made to reverse the scrub invasion and reinstate the historic wood pasture landscape in College Copse, the small area east of the Rangers House, by extending the grazed area at White Bottom during the summer months. New fencing will provide segregation with the minimum visual impact, and Kissing Gates will allow full access. Details are on the Park notice boards, and available by email upon request.

AWAITING DEVELOPMENTS?

The 1992 EU 'Habitats' Directive tried to draw a line to prevent development and 'progress' causing further extinctions of endangered species. However, in October 2005 the ECJ found the UK guilty of failing to implement the Directive adequately, tightening requirements. Locally, the 'Special Protection Area' heathland habitat of the endangered nightjars, Dartford warblers and woodlarks near Heath End (the Bourley & Long Valley SPA) stopped all housebuilding in Farnham, and further threatens plans to build 40,000 homes near the Thames Basin Heaths. Led by Natural England, the government's strategy was to offset the effect of increased recreational use of the heaths by providing attractive 'suitable alternative natural greenspace' (SANGs).

Waverley's decision to "improve" Farnham Park as the local 'attraction' led to last summer's Miniplan. It proposed to almost double the number of visitors across all 130 hectares of the Park, which by Natural England's standards could have required up to 500 new car parking spaces. The public consultation drew 247 responses querying the council's strategy and the Park's suitability, and further public representations led to the withdrawal of the Miniplan and WBC's entire planning Core Strategy after intervention by a Planning Inspector.

Further public representations resulted in a vastly reduced Miniplan that better reflects the reality of the Park's facilities. Repositioned as interim guidance to developers, it was agreed by the Council on February 20th, using existing car parking and assuming only 11 hectares of 'mitigation' land. Any future increases are subject to surveys and access improvements. With a recent survey estimating that well over a million people visit the nearby SPA every year, an evolving plan that attracts them to Farnham Park instead has to be of interest to us, just in case it actually works!

The FOFP Committee's concerns that the miniplan could conflict with the Restoration HAP, and that it only provided half the required funding, were rewarded with the Council agreeing to add a firm commitment to the full Restoration Plan. This provides strong protection to ensure that the nature of the Park does not change, whilst attracting all the much-needed management funding. We might soon have our Ranger on the Park full-time.

Waverley hope to have the Miniplan ready by mid-April, but there are still hurdles. Natural England's strategy and advice is still untested, and it is uncertain whether a plan to change recreational habits by little more than leafleting new Farnham residents is the solution that the brightest minds in Europe had overlooked.

The Friends' Committee will keep Members informed as Waverley's new Management Plan for the Park is finalised, and we will seek your views when appropriate.

- Chairman

WALKS AND TALKS - Dates for your diary

April 19th (Thursday), 6.30pm
'Trees of Farnham Park' Walk & Talk
with The Ranger

May 5th (Saturday), 10am
Family Walk
Exploring with Friends

June 7th (Thursday), 7.30pm
at Rowhills Centre
Archaeological Update
with David Graham of The Farnham Trust

Meet at the main car park unless otherwise stated.

WEDNESDAY WORKING PARTIES

A dedicated small band of volunteers meet most Wednesdays to help the Ranger with a variety of conservation tasks, and anyone wishing to pitch in would be most welcome. Meet at the car park at 10am; For confirmation ring the Rangers Office on 792416 or see the Park notice boards.

CRICKET

The Ashes series was a reminder that more parents should get their youngsters up to the Cricket Ground to enjoy the Friday evening training sessions. Your country needs you!

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

A very well-attended AGM saw the retirement of four longstanding Members of the committee. Cherry and Murray Nurse, Gary Shelford and Sarah Cox were thanked for all their hard work, and for going the extra mile to ensure the survival of the Friends' charity.

THE FRIENDS' COMMITTEE

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