

FRIENDS OF BECKENHAM PLACE PARK

July 2019 - SUMMER NEWSLETTER No. 88



From the Chair

Welcome to the Summer edition of the newsletter, which we hope you'll find of interest.

As you will see, we are continuing to organise a programme of free guided walks for park visitors to enjoy.

As well as regular gardening sessions in the Sensory Garden near the Homesteads, normally on the second and fourth Saturdays of the month, perhaps our main commitment is manning the Visitor Centre in the Mansion. Thanks to Beryl and her team of volunteers, we have been able to open every Sunday without missing a week, as well as extra days when there are events taking place in the park.

Since our last newsletter the Friends have received some fantastic news. You may recall we applied for a grant under the Government's Pocket Park Plus scheme which would enable us to open up the ancient pond on Stumps Hill. The pond has been fenced in for many years and inaccessible to park users and during that time the water had become badly silted up due to many overhanging trees.

I am delighted to share the news that our application was successful and work has been carried out by Lewisham's own trees team to cut down a couple of small trees to allow access to the pond and also lop some overhanging branches on the more established trees around the perimeter that were blocking light.

Specialist contractors Ebsford then used an impressive piece of equipment to clear the pond of rubbish and de-silt it.

Amongst the junk which has been dumped in the water was a burnt-out motorbike chassis and, not surprisingly, several golf clubs!

The next stage in the process is to plant a varied range of species around the pond edge to encourage wild life to flourish. The existing fence will remain in place until the plants are established.

As mentioned in the previous newsletter, we are keen for local children to use the pond for pond-dipping and generally learning more about the natural

environment around the pond. To this end, we are applying for another grant next month to construct a platform.

On a more general note, the lake is very close to completion, with just some planting and the jetty to be finished.

It seems that park users can't wait to try out the water. A large canoe was spotted in the water a few weeks back and several dogs have already breached the fence that is currently in place.

Work on the gardener's cottage is now finished and progress continues to be made on the Homesteads. Lewisham Council is seeking a tenant for the café that will be situated in the Homesteads.

The new car park will be open in July.

The official Re-Opening Day for the park is the 20th of July and it is understood that Damien Egan and also the Mayor of London will be attending.

Another important date in your diary is Monday 12th August which is the Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Beckenham Place Park. The AGM will start at 18.30 and will take place in the Mansion.



Clearing the silt from the pond

EVENTS PROGRAMME

Friday 12th July at 2pm.

The Cator Trail

This walk starts at the Mansion and goes out of the park to St. George's Church Beckenham, where we will be looking at the impressive Cator family tomb in the churchyard.

After a quick tour of the church, we can visit Kelsey Park if wished.

Monday 12th August at 18.30, in the Mansion

AGM of the Friends of Beckenham Place Park

Sunday 15th September at 2pm

Photography in the park

Local photographer, John Gaffen, will be demonstrating how to take great photos of the park.

Bring your camera or phone.

Saturday 26th October

Autumn Bird Migration

Meet at the Mansion steps at 8.30 for a quiet scan of the skies and/or at 9.30am for those preferring just to do the walk. Led by bird expert David de Silva.

All events commence from the Mansion steps unless otherwise stated.

Well behaved dogs are welcome. Details of walks are displayed on the noticeboards around the park and in the Visitor Centre. Please check the Friend's website for other summer events.

Contact details: Membership of the Friends is free for 2019,

Email: bpp.friends@hotmail.co.uk

Website: www.beckenhamplaceparkfriends.org.uk

A Letter to the Editor

At a time of despondent news coverage, your Newsletter arrives regularly as a ray of light revealing aspects of a sane and positive World.

I was at the first meeting in May 1993 that led to the formation of F0BPP. It was held at the school on Beckenham Hill Road, after David Lloyd plc had applied to take over the running of the Park with Lewisham Council's approval, and the meeting was held as a response to try and counter this. Randall North was voted in as the Chairman and launched an immediate signature-collecting campaign and we many volunteers managed to collect over 30,000 signatures, co-ordinated the letter writing to the Inspectorate and lobbied the Minister responsible.

It took just over a year to ensure that the Park was saved from commercial exploitation and the volunteers met for a celebratory picnic, close to the Squirrel in July 1994.

My memories of the Park go back to the 1930s when, as a schoolboy, it was a home-from-home for me and my friends. We would play there all day on weekends and holidays, only leaving when hunger or darkness drove us back to our other homes.

In the early days of WWII, after Dunkirk, we would cycle round the district seeing barrage balloon sites, anti-aircraft emplacements and bomb shelters all being installed on an emergency basis in the local parks in public view, as invasion was feared in 1941. Two soldiers manned a Bofors anti-aircraft gun on Crab Hill Field.

How glad I am that the Park was saved and the splendid Friends are there to protect it and save it for future generations.

Bill Mason

(footnote; the 1993 meeting was in fact the formation of the Save Beckenham Place Park Campaign which later converted to the Friends group after the Public Inquiry. [It may also have been a year or two earlier. But thanks for your recollections Bill])

EVENT REPORTS

A short winter stroll in BPP. - 14th February 2019

A glorious mid-February morning. The sky was clear blue with no wind and a mild 14 degrees C.

Fourteen of us set out for a short winter stroll. After circling the Mansion we headed down the old road within the park. Turning off to the left, onto the new winding footpath to the old Foxgrove Club (the original golf club house said to have been built with member subscriptions in 1912 and now occupied by Property Guardians).

Following the main footpath through the ancient woodland, we spotted plenty of notices about the bluebells which would shortly appear.

The outline of the bare tree branches against the sky was stunning.

Emerging from the woods, John Cator's re-instated lake came into view with wonderful reflections of the trees and two Egyptian geese on the bank!

We continued on through the Sensory Garden, which is maintained by the Friends, and admired the restoration of the Homesteads before heading back to the Mansion.

Throughout the walk, pairs of Ring Neck Parakeets were house hunting and highly vocal – as were the walkers, chatting away about the history, nature and the transformation of the park.

A very enjoyable 90 minutes. My thanks to everyone who came along.
Beryl

Discovering the Downham Woodland Walk and beyond – 26th March 2019

We visited five green open spaces on our Discovery walk: four in Lewisham and one in Bromley.

Starting in BPP, we headed off to the Downham Woodland walk (Oakridge Road – Moorside Road) where Janet and Sue, who are Friends of the Downham Woodland Walk, told us about the history and the wildlife.

The Bluebells were just opening and the yellow lesser Celandine looked splendid in the sunshine.

There was also a good vista of Canary Wharf.

Onwards towards the Downham Leisure Centre via Downham Fields, where a distant view of BPP's Mansion and Homesteads was espied.

Then on via Valeswood Road, popping into Bromley's Shaftsbury Park, source of the Spring Brook, which we followed through the Downham playing fields. We finished our walk at the foot of Downham Way.

So nice to discover almost hidden green areas on our doorstep. We all enjoyed the walk and thanks to everyone who came.

Bluebell Walk 28 April 2019

Thirty of us set off from the Mansion with Nick Bertrand our guide to pause first at the old oak, whose pollarded branches testify to the historic landscape where cattle & sheep had once grazed. On the acid grassland we also came across sorrel, dandelion, shepherds purse, daisy and cat's ear before continuing our route along Crab Hill meadow, into the ancient woodland and around the former lake area.

We observed 20 specimens of wild flowers in their distinct habitats and oak, hawthorn, and holly in flower. We learnt to distinguish cow parsley from pignut, the culinary properties of garlic mustard and ale hoof, how plant structure favours the propagation of white dead nettle and goose grass and that dove's foot crane's bill and herb robert are both part of the Geranium family; whereas red dead nettle is a member of the Mint.

Our purpose wasn't to complete a comprehensive study but it did give us a chance to monitor the impact of the regeneration scheme underway. In the proposed wetland area wild garlic-ransom, and in the ancient woodland lesser celandine and wood millet, still flourish but bare tracks crisscrossing the carpet of bluebells revealed the impact of unwanted human intrusion.

The plants are most vulnerable when their leaves are trampled or by heavy transit over soil where bulbs lie dormant.

As well as the wondrous bluebell display there were three other highlights this year: a dormouse peeping out from the undergrowth; three veined sandwort, a new ancient woodland species, was found; and a sturdy hemlock, an old friend that sprouted from a bunker last year, was now growing on safer ground by the path leading up to the sensory garden.

Thanks again to Nick for leading us on another memorable walk.

Britain is home to half the world's - north Europe's - bluebell population.

In south east England the species is only found in ancient woodland (or remnant hedgerows) more than four hundred years old.

Each plant has a life span of many decades.

*The indigenous species **Hyacinthoides non-scripta** is distinguished from the hybrid garden variety by its bowed flower stem and more delicate leaves.*



History walk in the Park

The weather looked perfect for the History Walk in the park in May and a dozen or so people turned up at the Mansion steps to learn more about the history of our beautiful park. Mind you, we did get rather damp and cold as the clouds gathered!

Mal demonstrated his encyclopaedic knowledge of the history, starting before John Cator moved to Beckenham and started buying up land around what was the hamlet of Beckenham.

John Cator, who was a wealthy timber merchant, built the mansion between 1760 and 1762 and set about transforming the fields and pastures into landscaped grounds and also constructing the original lake. His father-in-law was Peter Collinson, a famous botanist, so John Cator received some useful help in selecting trees and plants. Collinson said "When Cator married my daughter he scarce knew an Oak from an Apple" but he acquired a great interest in plants.

When Cator died in 1806 he was described as 'immensely rich' but had no children to leave his land and money to. His estate went to his brother's son, John Barwell Cator.

The Mansion was put to a range of different uses in the subsequent years and a private golf course was established in 1907. The London County Council bought the golf course and parkland in 1928 and in 1972 the subsequent GLC transferred ownership of it to London Borough of Lewisham.

Mal pointed out the original boundary between Beckenham and Lewisham which passed close to the side of the Mansion.

A most enjoyable walk, despite the weather, thank you Mal.

Several established accounts of the history are now out of date or challenged. The full history of the park is on www.beckenhamplaceparkfriends.org.uk

Sensory Garden and workdays

The garden is still open while other garden landscaping work goes on. The Friends' volunteers are working on the second and fourth Saturdays each month ie next workday is July 13th. (10am to noon) meet in the garden. Plants have recovered well from last years near drought conditions but a lack of rain is again causing dry conditions which can be seen on the parks grasslands.

Currently blooming are Columbine, Love in a Mist, Geranium, Jerusalem Sage and Woodruff. People are not expected to attend every workday, just as and when it suits. Tools and instruction provided, no experience necessary. Contact bpp.friends@hotmail.co.uk



Sensory Garden with works behind