

FRIENDS OF BECKENHAM PLACE PARK

August 2020 - SUMMER NEWSLETTER
No.89



From the Chair

Welcome to our Summer newsletter. Apologies for not publishing our usual regular newsletters during the year, but as members will be all too aware, life is far from normal at the moment!

As you may be aware, the Visitor Centre was closed the second week of March.

Fortunately, we managed to locate somewhere where the collection can be stored safely, and were able to move everything before lockdown kicked in. We sincerely hope that Lewisham will be able to find us a new home. Before lockdown we met with Vince Buchanan of Green Scene, who has apparently been asked to try and find a solution. Because of the virus, we have not followed up the first meeting, but as soon as things become more settled, rest assured we will do so.

We have decided not to hold an AGM this year, as finding a location for the meeting would prove a challenge. Many members prefer to receive a printed copy of the newsletter, so may not be able to participate in a 'virtual' meeting via Zoom.

Contact details:

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AGM

The AGM has been suspended for this year, in view of Covid-19 restrictions. All existing members of the committee have agreed to continue in their posts for a further year. Year End accounts for the Friends will be published on the website.

Membership will continue to be free this year.

Events programme

One walk 'The Fungus Foray' led by Dr Mark Spencer is planned for the 4th October meeting at the Mansion steps at 2p.m. (subject to Covid-19 restrictions) – please check the website nearer the date.

All other events have been suspended for the time being. Please check the Friend's website for any events that are arranged in the future.

Visitor Centre

The Friends were requested to vacate the Visitor Centre in the Mansion by RJK as Lewisham had made no provision for us when granting a lease to RJK.

The Visitor Centre is now closed, after years of effort at being an information centre for park visitors. All of the display material has been stored in 'space' in a local community library and larger items in a storage container. The move involved a lot of hard work and we thank all who helped (especially Beryl,,Tamsin, Elaine and Mal). The hope is that it can be re-used in some other location. This will depend on Lewisham's generosity – so far they have offered (predominantly empty) words of help but no premises.

COVID-19 Effect

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen many people re-discovering the wonder of public parks. As lockdown is gradually being rolled back, it will be interesting to see how many will largely abandon parks to return to previous leisure activities, such as shopping and the gym? Winter will be interesting for all long-standing regular park users.

Covid-19 has done more to populate Beckenham Place Park than any initiative by Lewisham Council, and it is telling that those areas of the park (i.e. most of it), where not one penny of National Lottery Heritage Fund grant was spent, has been brimming with people as much as the so-called regenerated areas.

The increase in visitors during lockdown has been challenging in terms of the increase in litter and the closure of the toilets, with reports of human excrement in the park having reared an ugly head. Sadly, this has been a

common theme at many outdoor spaces throughout the country. The litter does seem to be dealt with quickly, the groundsman is often to be seen out in his cart emptying bins.

The lake opened for swimming on 13th July and will accommodate up to 60 swimmers at a time, paying £5.50 per hour.

Wildlife News

Without swimmers the lake has quickly become a wildlife haven. The planted reeds have established and also the newly enclosed boundary hedging, which is yet to establish, both add some protection for the breeding waterfowl.

With warmer days we have lots of dragonflies and blanket weed harbouring insect life and food - this has now been mainly cleared in readiness for swimmers.

There are at least four coot families, one mallard family and Egyptian Geese who unfortunately lost their chicks. Mandarin ducks are also in the park but on two separate occasions there has been an unfortunate loss of chicks.

Moorhens and Little Grebes are also breeding and also seen amongst bird visitors have been a common sandpiper, heron and cormorant.

We obviously have concerns when swimmers and canoeists will be added to this mix. On 30th August Lewisham Council hope to hold a Triathlon. Thus the lake will be full of swimmers with the noise of loudspeakers and spectators. This does not seem to bode well for the natural inhabitants!

Maps of swimming and cycling routes can be viewed at www.BPPXtri.com.

The woods are also full of birds, including wrens, robins, blackcaps, chiffchaffs, hobbies, goldcrests and woodpeckers.

Ancient Pond

Readers will be aware that in the last 18 months the Friends have been spearheading the regeneration of the long-neglected Ancient Pond (also known as Stumps Hill Pond), to the north-west of the Mansion. This work has been made possible by two separate grants, from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Veolia Environmental Trust, with additional funding and project management support from LBL. In the main the project has run very smoothly - first with de-silting and

access works in March/April 2019, and then with the construction of the access path, viewing/dipping platform and seating in January/February 2020. The pond is now fully accessible, including to wheelchairs and buggies, for the first time in over 25 years, and it has proved a very popular destination within the Park ever since it opened - which came with excellent timing, just before lockdown and the Park's emergence as a top local destination! It has been particularly interesting to note how many people have said 'I didn't even know there was a pond there' - which always makes me wonder how much there is under my own nose, in my local area, that I haven't noticed yet...

Top-quality design and execution

We are particularly pleased with the quality and the design of the viewing/dipping platform, which was built entirely on site, by hand, by a very talented team from the specialist Norfolk company Flights of Fantasy. As you will see if you visit the pond, the platform fits seamlessly into its setting, following the contours and gradients of the site, and the workmanship is of a very high standard. The aim of the overall design, with its intentionally meandering access path, is that when the path-side vegetation regrows there will be a wonderful sense of discovery for visitors arriving at the platform and its views across the pond.

It's also worth noting that all the timber used is FSC-certified UK oak from a very tightly managed forest in Norfolk. The only exceptions are the two backless benches on the platform itself, which are instead made from 'homegrown' Beckenham Place Park oak - timber carefully salvaged during the Heritage Lottery Fund regeneration works.

There is more such timber available so perhaps we should have a collective think about whether any other useful Park 'furniture' could be made?

The formal part of the project is now almost complete, with just finishing touches required. As we go to press, we are awaiting delivery of two signboards (interpretation and safety) and sourcing quotes for a litter bin to install near the pond benches. The bin was not in the original specification, but we have a little money left and during lockdown the need for it has become very apparent... Park volunteers working under the direction of Lucy Mitchell, Lewisham's community engagement officer, are also in the

process of planting up the banks with 900 plugs of native bog and marginal species kindly donated by id Verde.

Invasive plant infestation

However, we cannot report on the pond project without discussion of what any visitor will have immediately noticed - the rampant infestation of the water by an invasive non-native species, azolla filiculoides. It is not clear how this plant got into the water, but it clearly poses a threat to the native ecosystem and must be removed. After some delay due to coronavirus, Lewisham Council have now commissioned a biological control solution (a weevil) from the non-profit specialist company CABI, which has been released in the pond and should take effect in the coming weeks. It may be, however, that ongoing management is required to prevent regrowth. Newsletter readers interested in following up this point can read more at <https://www.cabi.org/projects/azolla-control/>

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So, overall, the 'Ancient Pond project' is nearly finished... but not quite! As always the devil is in the detail, with a few financial points to tie up and small items to install. But we very much hope that, once the azolla is dealt with, Park visitors - whether two-legged, four-legged or winged - will find a wonderful new resource for both humans and wildlife to enjoy.

Sensory Garden

The COVID lockdown meant that volunteer activities in the park had to cease for a while so the Sensory Garden has been left to its own devices. As it's also a wildlife garden it has been 'wild' for the past three months We have just started some low key workdays with a reduced team of volunteers as some are still isolating as they are in high risk categories.

The wildness of the garden is evident in the amount of grasses colonizing the garden and some cereals such as wheat and oats. The seeds of the plants will provide some food for birds and we get bank voles and frogs in the garden. We still welcome new volunteers and we have made some provision for increased safety measures with hi-vis vests, hazard tape and some signs requesting people to distance from gardeners. Contact us through bpp.friends@hotmail.com if you would like to volunteer. Workdays are

usually on Saturday mornings every fortnight. The dates are a bit random at the moment but hopefully becoming more regular as conditions improve. Usually we aim to work on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays in any month from 10am to midday.

Park History

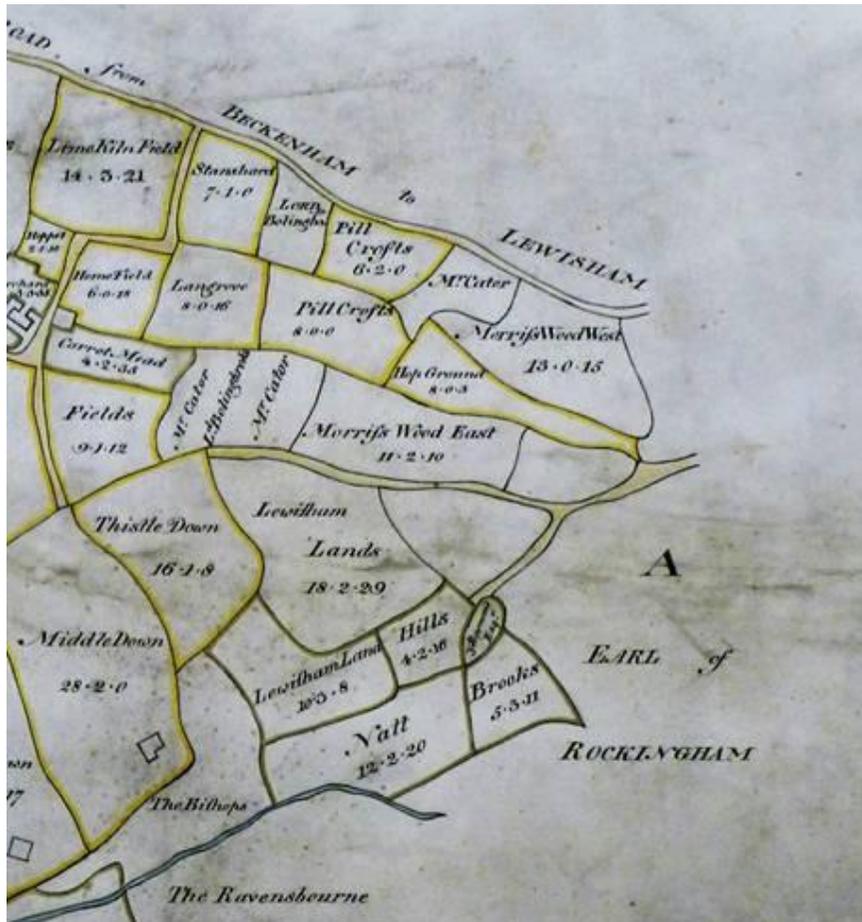
The Friends website still hosts a history of the park and also a more general 'Beckenham' page. Both are in the form of timelines recapping on previous histories by various writers and correcting some detail found to be erroneous in past accounts. Additional articles are hosted such as a piece about the plasterwork of the mansion, an article about Beckenham Rectory designed by the Adam brothers and an article about Shortlands and Clay Hill. We also link the various accounts of those other writers. It has to be said that recent works in the park have obscured some of the physical features of the former parkland. Excavation has both dug up some features and dumping of spoil within the park has covered up other landmark features reshaping the ground. Of course the park landscape which John Cator created over a period of about thirty or forty years itself reshaped the former mainly agricultural landscape of Foxgrove Manor.

Look for history links on www.beckenhamplaceparkfriends.org.uk

<<http://www.beckenhamplaceparkfriends.org.uk>>

In connection with the following piece about Crab Hill meadow in the park we should explain that Crab Hill was supposedly named from Crab Apple trees in that area but now we find that the field was originally called Thistle Down as part of Foxgrove Manor and the road Crab Hill got its name from another field which was outside the park area and part of Foxgrove Farm called Crab Tree Field. We can trace field names from various maps of Foxgrove Manor 1766, Beckenham Manor 1768 and Tithe maps from 1838. How the name Thistle Down got dropped is unknown but Crab Tree Field disappeared under housing development around Foxgrove Road, Westgate Road and The Avenue and the proximity of Crab Hill (the road) has been adopted as a name. Similarly, the field adjoining Crab Hill and going down to the Railway is called Railway Field but the old maps describe it as Lewisham Land Hills describing both its hilly nature and the fact that it was in the parish of Lewisham. Across the railway and alongside the

Ravensbourne we now call Summerhouse Field but it was formerly called Natt Brooks. The area between the Ravensbourne, the railway and the back of Brangbourne Road we now call the Common, but that was partly Natt Brooks and an area on the Foxgrove Manor map which described it as grazing for 20 Great Beasts of Foxgrove which we take to be Oxen used for plough teams. These areas by the Ravensbourne were lower, wetter and had some reed beds but the story goes that the land was built up with either wartime bombsite rubble or spoil from the building of Downham estate (perhaps a bit of both).



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In the above map from 1776, the mansion is in 'Mr Cater' near LEWISHAM. Crab Hill is Thistle Down. Morrisswood East and Lewisham Lands are

Summerhouse Wood. Beckenham Hill Road was not built until 1785. Yellow border is land belonging to Jones Raymond until 1768 and his sister Amy Burrell in 1776. John Cator acquired the park in 'instalments' from 1759 and into the 1790's.

Crab Hill Meadow

Crab Hill is that part of the park nearest the entrance on Crab Hill near Ravensbourne Station or via the entrance at the end of Westgate Road. Of course it can be reached through the woodland of Summerhouse Hill Wood. Crab Hill was the site of the wartime POW camp and after a long period as a football pitch the field has been left to adopt a meadow appearance. The grass is mown only once or twice a year and the resultant hay gathered by a contracted farmer who has the appropriate machinery for mowing and collecting hay. Apart from some mown paths or walkways most of the field is left to grow and recently we were asked what type of grass grows there. The answer is 'several types' or species. Grasses are a wide range of species and among the grasses we also find buttercups, daisies, clovers, etc. As a football pitch the main species was probably rye grass but over time other species will have colonized. There's no such thing as a weed, they are really wild plants and flowers growing where they can gain a foothold. The adage 'a weed is a plant growing in the wrong place' holds good. Many wild plants provide nectar for insects whereas many 'horticultural' plants have little value for wildlife. An exercise might be to collect various grass, flower or seed heads and try to identify them from the internet. The differences range from obvious to very subtle but it can give you a better idea of the diversity within meadow plants. The impact is hopefully to aid the survival of other species such as insects, butterflies, birds, small mammals. Regrettably the 'Bluebell Walk' did not happen this year, but if it takes place next spring then do go along as Nick Bertrand will also describe the variety of grasses in the meadow and other areas of the park.

Websites of Interest

Lewisham Local History Society

www.lewishamhistory.org.uk

Bromley Local History

www.bblhs.org.uk

Ravensbourne Valley Preservation Society

www.rvpsbromley.org