

Friends of Tooting Common AGM 12 November 2017 Chair's Report on last year

This has been another very busy year for the Friends group. We have run a very considerable number, and wide range, of activities and events on Tooting Common. We have also made a considerable input into a number of consultations and other discussions with Wandsworth Council and Enable about the Common and its facilities. It has been a particularly eventful year on the Common, with the felling and replacement of the trees on Chestnut Avenue.

I am sorry for again a rather long report, but there is a lot to report on!

FOTC's aims

We aim to promote the public use and enjoyment of the Common, and to help protect it as an excellent area of open space with distinctive character, available to everyone. We want to help make it a better place for people, plants and wildlife.

Our events and activities, and the input we make to consultations and discussions, are directed to these aims.

Activities and events

Winter Solstice

We organised an event to mark the winter solstice (shortest day) in December 2016. This was a very enjoyable event, including making raffia-covered stars, poetry, singing, information on the science of the solstice, the setting up of a compass marked by lights, and mulled wine and other hot drinks.

Bat walks

Our bat walks are one of our main regular activities and we held monthly bat walks this year between March and October, led by Geraldine (Kelly), Helen (Matthews) and Susie (Meade), and we are very grateful to them. These walks have been well attended and popular. A number of non-members have attended and joined FOTC as a result. It has been good to be able to observe bat activity over a considerable period of time.

Litter picks

Our litter picking sessions are also one of our main regular activities. Over the year we have run about 20 litter picking sessions, in different parts of the

Common, led by Andrew (Sharp): we are very grateful to Andrew for organising this large number of picks. The numbers attending the picks has varied, but they have all been very successful in clearing a considerable amount of litter. While in some parts of the Common the volume of litter has not been too bad, in others, including around the ecology ponds, we have noted serious problems, and have raised these with Enable.

Fun Dog Show

We held our annual Fun Dog Show on 11 June. This was a very enjoyable and well-attended event, with about 400 people attending and over 100 entries to the 10 classes. The classes covered a wide range of topics - from 'Most handsome dog' to 'Waggiest Tail!' There was lots to celebrate in the range of dogs taking part, both in those getting prizes and in all those entered for the classes. We were very glad that the MP for Tooting, Rosena Allin-Khan, was able to attend and judge one of the classes. We are also very grateful to the Parks Police and others who judged classes.

One very unfortunate aspect of the event however was that Idverde, who manage Commons facilities for Enable and the Council, failed to open the toilets on the Common, which they had agreed with us to do, and which we had paid for. This was a serious matter but beyond our control. We have registered very serious concerns with Idverde and with Enable at the way Idverde let us down.

Pumpkin Parade

Our annual Pumpkin Parade was held two weeks ago, on 29 October, and was also a very enjoyable and successful event, with about 250 people attending and over 100 entries for the pumpkin competitions. There were a large number of very imaginative carved pumpkins, and we awarded rosettes for the best pumpkins in three categories (funniest, scariest and most artistic). There were also many excellent entries for home-made fancy dress, in four age categories. The event also included storytelling for children.

Botanical and other walks

We have also held a number of walks on the Common over the year:

On 1 January we had an informal walk on the Common to mark the New Year, despite the rain!

In March and October, Colm (O'Flynn) led nature walks on the Common, looking at changes in the Common in the Spring and Autumn. Colm also organised an informal event in April to hear the Dawn Chorus.

In April, Candida (Jones) led a short walk to identify sites of garlic growing on the Common.

Also in April, Leonie (Cooper) led a bluebell walk in Graveney Woods.

These walks were all well attended, and popular. We are very grateful to each of the people leading them for sharing their knowledge and expertise with us.

Midsummer Social event

We also arranged an informal midsummer social event on the Common on 25 June, including for people who were interested in joining FOTC.

Consultations and other involvement in issues relating to the Common

During the year, we have had very considerable involvement in discussions of issues relating to the Common.

Chestnut Avenue

The major development on the Common during the year has been the felling and replacement of the trees on Chestnut Avenue in September under the Tooting Common Heritage Project.

Although we are aware that there are some differing views about this work among FOTC members, FOTC as an organisation has been opposed to it, on the basis of the survey of our members which we organised last year, where a clear majority preferred gradual replacement of the trees over time, as and when needed, rather than immediate felling and replacement. This formed the basis of the deputation which we brought to the Council meeting in September 2016: nonetheless the Council decided to proceed with the plans for immediate felling and replacement of nearly all the trees. We continued to oppose these plans during this last year, along with the Save Chestnut Avenue Action Group who were in the lead in taking forward opposition to the plans.

As an organisation, FOTC therefore strongly regrets the felling and replacing of the trees on Chestnut Avenue. It is very disappointing that the Council did not pursue the option of gradual replacement which we proposed on a number of occasions.

We have asked the Council for a systematic assessment of the condition of each of the chestnut trees that were felled, but, as yet at least, have not received this.

Now that the trees have been replaced, it is clearly very important that the right actions are taken to ensure that the new lime trees thrive. These are clearly at present much smaller than the chestnut trees - and indeed are smaller than a number of statements by Wandsworth Council would have led us to believe they would be. We understand that Enable are making arrangements for the maintenance of the new trees. It will indeed be important that the Council and Enable do put sufficient resources into the development of the new trees, both in the short and longer term, to ensure that they do grow into strong and healthy trees, and, in time, become a source of enjoyment to all Commons users. We will be keeping in close contact with Enable and the Council on the development of the new trees.

Quietway

We have continued to be involved in discussions on the Council's/ TfL's plans for the cycling Quietway across the Common. We consulted our members by a survey in December on the revised plans for Quietway, including use of the "diagonal path" from the junction by Bedford Hill, to the east of the Lake, to the Lido car park; and for the use of Breedon gravel for all of the pedestrian/ cycle path.

On the basis of the response from members (with only about 45% of our members responding 'supporting' or 'strongly supporting' the principle of a cycling Quietway through the Common), we expressed considerable reservations about the Council's/ TfL's plans. While supporting in general the intention of increased provision for and encouragement of cycling, we doubted that Tooting Common is the right place for a Quietway. We reported concerns that some cyclists travel too fast on the current shared path, and show inadequate consideration for pedestrians; and we also expressed considerable concerns that under the plans there would be two shared pedestrian/ cycle paths on the Common south of Bedford Hill. We supported the proposed use of Breedon gravel for surfacing.

It does seem likely that the Quietway will nonetheless go ahead, on the basis the Council and TfL intend, but we are keeping in contact with the Council on this.

Triangle field development

We have continued to be involved in consideration of plans for development of the Triangle site. The Council intend to grant a lease for development of some of the facilities on the site, developing the existing redgra pitch (which is in a poor state) and the existing adjacent buildings. The aim would be to provide an artificial grass surfaced sports facility; facilities for the Boxing Club; changing and refreshment facilities; and publicly accessible toilets.

Detailed proposals have not yet been drawn up but the Council have consulted about the general intention to grant a lease. We consulted members on this, and on this basis our line for the present has been not to oppose the development of the site in principle, but to recognise that the redeveloped facilities could, if done well, be a good facility for Common users generally. Our aim will be to seek to ensure that the development balances the views and needs of different Commons users, and that the development is 'reasonable' with eg reasonable limits on the extent of any floodlighting or noise, and no encroachment on to the rest of the Common. We have responded to the initial consultation on this basis. There will be further opportunities to comment when more specific proposals are drawn up.

Tooting Common Heritage Project

We have continued to be part of the Steering Group for Stage 2 of the Heritage Project, which (as next para) includes a number of different initiatives on the Common (alongside those for Chestnut Avenue and Dr Johnson Avenue). However, the basis of our involvement is advisory only: we do not have responsibility for delivery.

We are keeping members informed of work under the Heritage Project. Although much attention has - appropriately - been given to the felling and replacement of Chestnut Avenue, there is a good deal of other, and very useful, work being carried out under the Heritage Project, including the development of the Woodfield pavilion, heritage work on the Lido, development of acid grassland sites, restoration work at the Lake, planting some new trees, historical research, development of volunteer activities, and an employment, skills and learning initiative.

Among other things, the Heritage Project are considering plans to introduce additional traffic calming measures on Dr Johnson Avenue, while keeping it open to vehicles. We have informed members of these plans, and have supported them, while advising the Project that these plans should be kept separate from any other proposals for changes to traffic arrangements, in view of the considerable problems arising in the earlier consultation on plans for Dr Johnson Avenue.

Byelaws

During the year, the Council consulted on plans to extend byelaws - which currently only apply to the 12 larger parks in Wandsworth (including Tooting Common) - to all parks and open spaces in Wandsworth. While this is entirely reasonable as such, we raised with Enable possible concerns that as a result the Parks Police (without any increase in resources) would be less able to give

attention to Tooting Common. Enable consider that this should not be a problem in practice, in part because of the plan to introduce Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs), as below. However we will want to keep this under review.

We also informed members of the plans to introduce FPNs.

Telecomms installations

In January, we opposed an appeal by Vodafone against refusal by the Council of planning application for a phone mast on the railway embankment near Cavendish Road, on the grounds that the mast would involve considerable visual impact on the Common. This appeal was subsequently turned down. We also kept in contact with Enable in their dealing with work carried out by BT without permission and connected to this application.

In April, we opposed an application for another telecomms mast by the Bedford Hill railway bridge, on the grounds of visual impact on the Common, and since it was very close to an existing telecomms mast. This application was also turned down by the Council.

Our line on these telecomms installations has been that we recognise that in general there is a need for good mobile phone reception; but that we consider that it is for mobile phone providers, and local authority planning departments engaging with them, to provide good reception while as far as possible avoiding visual intrusion on areas like Tooting Common.

Small brick 'hut', and need for prior planning permission

We raised concerns with the Council during the year about the installation of a small brick 'hut' on the Common by Tooting Bec Road, which we understand is for the electrical supply for the Lido. While this was a small and relatively uncontentious item as such, we were concerned that planning permission for this was not sought prior to its installation, as should have been done, and that planning permission was then sought retrospectively. As a point of principle, it is important that the Council ensure that, for any work or installation on the Common that requires planning permission, permission is sought beforehand; and that people involved with the Common have a chance to comment on it before the application is considered. This is particularly important because the cumulative effect of a number of small developments could be seriously detrimental to the distinctive character of the Common. A somewhat similar problem arose the previous year with work on trees and hedges by the Lido.

Changes to cycling arrangements along Tooting Bec Road

We informed members of a consultation by TfL on some changes to cycling provision along the eastern part of Tooting Bec Road (which actually runs

through the Common on that stage). These plans include installing semi-segregated cycle lanes on Tooting Bec Road, marked with plastic wands.

Dogs and the Lake

During the spring, there were some problems around the Lake with some dogs chasing geese and other wildlife on and by the Lake. This was particularly of concern with goslings and ducklings on the Lake. We raised this with the Parks Police who say they keep a watch on this, and also intended to organise a responsible dog ownership roadshow. We also issued a message to members to ask dog owners to keep dogs away from the Lake area if at all possible, and in any case to keep dogs firmly on a lead near the Lake.

Other issues

We requested from Enable, and passed on to members, information on oak processionary moth, and also on reporting vandalism to trees. We also raised with Enable the issue of parakeets on the Common.

FOTC budget and resources

We have resources of around £4,000 available, and are considering how best to use this to further our aims of promoting the public use and enjoyment of the Common.

Forthcoming events

We will be planning our programme of events for coming months and the year. We are planning for a number of similar events to last year, but would be glad of any comments and suggestions.

Committee

I am very grateful to the committee for all their work throughout the year, which is vital to maintaining and developing our work. Particular thanks to Eamonn (Richardson) our Treasurer, and Susie (Meade) our Membership Secretary. Many thanks too to Simon (Hemsley) who handles our Twitter account, and to Anna (Eriksson) who handles our website.

Summary – and a request!

As I have mentioned for the last couple of years, there is a great deal happening, both in terms of our events and activities, and of other developments where our comments and input on matters affecting the Common are very likely to be useful and relevant to our aims. However in order to maintain and develop FOTC's work we do continue to need involvement by members, in different ways - for example by joining the committee, helping to lead a walk or other event, or helping with FOTC's administrative or publicity work. If you would be interested in being involved, in any way, we would be very glad to hear from you! (Email address is fotcinformation@gmail.com)

Peter Ramell
Chair, Friends of Tooting Common
November 2017