

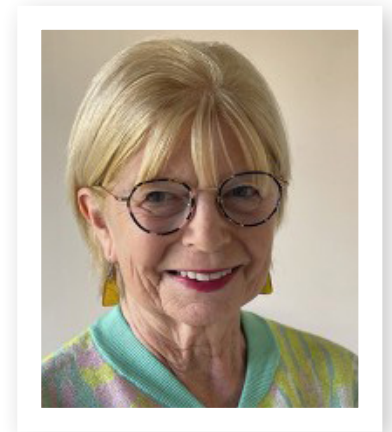


CHRIST CHURCH, WEST WIMBLEDON

Creationtide talk

Christ Church Sunday 29 September

By Sue Bucknall, Conservator of Wimbledon & Putney Common



Part 1

Unaccustomed as I am to speaking in this church, I did not know what to say. What had my work on the Commons got to do with Christchurch and creationtide? Then, on walking past the church the other day, as I do frequently, I happened to read your banner outside which says:

Walking in faith together

Welcoming strangers and friends

Working for our community

And the lightbulb moment occurred. We are all working for the same result. Maybe you in your corner of Copse Hill and I in mine at the Rangers office on the Commons, but in either case the message to love, honour and preserve God's creation is the same and made stronger by working together.

We are already united. To summarise, Wimbledon was a village. Wimbledon Common belonged to the Lord of the Manor. In 1838 the railway came to Wimbledon and within a few years Wimbledon became a town. Houses and industries were built quickly and it became clear that a church was needed in the Copse Hill area. On Monday, the 15th of August 1859 this church was dedicated by the Bishop of London and it remains as beautiful today. It acquired parish status in 1961 and its parish covers much of Wimbledon Common.

Back in 1859, the present Lord of the Manor, one Earl Spencer, decided that this was a good time to sell off much of the Commons to the highest bidder for housing, industry and so on. An Act had been passed called the Enclosures Act which allowed for open land to be enclosed and sold. Nearly 4000 pieces of open land had already been sold and enclosed at that time. We were losing our green and pleasant land, the creation, to industrialists and money makers and here was just one more which very nearly made it and, if it had, our wonderful Commons would have been lost to us forever.



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One of my favourite hymns at school Number 518 in the Songs of Praise Hymn Book (if I remember correctly, which I probably don't) was this...

*Here in the country's heart
Where the grass is green
Life is the same sweet life
As it e'er hath been*

*Trust in a God still lives
And the bell at morn
Floats with a thought of God
O'er the rising corn*

*God comes down in the rain
And the crop grow tall
This is the country faith
And the best of all*

Although simple it expresses the strong belief in the endurance of nature and faith. It was written in Victorian times when urbanisation was transforming society and many people were seeking solace and stability in traditional beliefs and values. The author was Norman Roland Gale who live just down the road in Kew.

Part 2

So Wimbledon Common could have been lost forever had it not been for the efforts of a small group of men called "the Commons preservation society" who banded together to raise money and expertise to defeat the Bill and stop the Enclosure Act being used?

Earl Spencer had claimed that the commons was out of control, places had become a swamp and at Caesar's well there lived "many very immoral characters who brought contagious diseases, did not submit to sanitary regulations and committed depredations".

He held a meeting in the village club and, because earlier attempts had failed, he this time promised a piece of the land would be turned into a public park (sounds familiar?). This proved a popular move with many, including the Times, Punch and the vicar of Holy Trinity!



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However, under the leadership of Henry Peak (of biscuit fame) John Murray and Joseph Toynby formed a committee to keep the Commons open for all. Earl Spencer retaliated with building a brick yard, expanding gravel digging and even opening a sewage farm. But the group stood strong and grew stronger and eventually the Earl gave away and compromised.

On the 16th of August 1871 the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act received the Royal Assent.

“to at all times keep the Commons open and unenclosed and protect and preserve them for the recreation and enjoyment of all.”

The Act allowed for five Conservators, i.e. people responsible for the repair and preservation of things of environmental interest, to be elected every three years and to fulfil this role without payment or favour plus 3 other Conservators appointed by Government Departments.

As Margaret Mead said *“never doubt that a small group of thoroughly committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”*

Part 3

153 years later the Commons are run in exactly the same way with five elected Conservators, or trustees as I prefer to call us, and three appointed ones. The only difference is that at least we now have female Conservators and I am very privileged to be one of them. Thank you for those who voted for me - twice! David Brown was also elected this time so you now have two very local Conservators.

We do our best to look after the 1100 acres, not just for people and their dogs, horses, cycles and so on but all of our trees, heathland – the largest Heath site in London – fauna, acid grass and bogs, which help in the challenge of climate change, and all of our birds, insects, rabbits, badgers and all who live in this site of special scientific interest which covers most of the Commons.

Life is not easy trying to keep everyone and everything happy and thriving. Funding is difficult, builders would still like to impose, many people do not respect the Commons in the way that we would like. Somebody said “the



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opposite of love is not hate but indifference!” which often seems true these days and one we try to address with education and kindness.

We hope we do our very best to keep this little part of Eden as it should be for future generations.

On a busy Sunday we often have over 10,000 visitors to the Commons and of course during Covid that number increased and more people now seek the solace and stability that the modern world lacks. As was said in Woodstock in 1969. “we need to get ourselves back to the garden”.

I chair the Friends of the Commons and our joint mission is to fund raise (currently few people realise that we are a charity with no central or local government funding) and to bring people together through community engagement.

One way we do this is through our Walk and Talk group which leaves the war memorial every Saturday, rain or shine throughout the year so people can chat together, make new friends and enjoy the many delights of the Commons. I am pleased to say that the Reverend Lotwina (together with members of her family) has not only joined us on several occasions, but also invited us back here to the church for mince pies at Christmas and hot cross buns at Easter.

Recently, both Christchurch in its garden and the Commons outside its offices have opened wildlife Gardens to everyones’ delight. Ours has a pond, now thriving with fish, frogs and water boatman. As the next generation discovers nature, the adults rest on our new benches and admire our mighty oaks. We all must continue our work to look after all of nature’s kingdom, locally and globally for the future well-being of all.

“Let all that we do be done in love and let us continue to walk in faith together.”