

Epsom Common Association

Chair's Report 2023 - 2024

As usual we have been busy. During 2023 we completed 8 two day conservation tasks; 22 volunteers contributed a total of 142.5 days work. ECoVols also worked on Epsom and Ashted Commons during the January joint task. In addition we held 13 two hour bracken evenings in the summer; 9 volunteers contributed a total of 66 evenings.

2023 marked the 20th anniversary of our first charcoal burn. There were 10 charcoal burns, plus other tasks for bagging, etc. 13 volunteers contributed 86 days work to produce 246 bags of charcoal. We continue to see the benefit of the charcoal retort, with average production of nearly 25 bags per burn, more than could be achieved from the ring kilns, but with much less smoke. The proceeds from charcoal sales, £1227, is a very significant part of our income, and should increase further, as we have raised our wholesale and retail prices. Many thanks to John Turner, who continues to run both the conservation work and charcoal making, as well as all the volunteers.

On four days every week from May to September, two volunteers, from a team of around fifteen, found and checked all fifteen cattle across three grazing areas. They also checked the electric fences, salt licks, water troughs, and horse gates. Daily checking is essential to ensure the welfare of the animals; by providing the majority of this effort, the ECA makes continued grazing possible. Thanks to Bruce Critchley and his team.

Our road representatives collected subscriptions from and delivered newsletters to around 450 membership households. We also have over 50 email members and a handful of postal members. I would like to thank the road reps, organised by the Membership Secretary Martin Gandy, who also edits the three editions of our newsletter and arranges the printing and distribution.

In addition we held the AGM and Autumn Talk and arranged five guided walks, including one a short way from the Common at Horton Country Park. We also had a stand at the Eco Fair at St Martin's church and the Health & Wellbeing event in Rosebery Park; both events resulted in the recruitment of new members.

Behind this hive of activity are our twelve committee members, who as well as attending six meetings, organised all of the above. They also found time for various meetings and site visits with representatives from: EEBC, Lower Mole Partnership, Ashted Common Rangers, and Natural England. I would like to thank them for their efforts on behalf of the ECA.

I should particularly mention Conor Morrow who represented the Lower Mole Partnership on our committee for over twenty years. He retired last September; we wish him all the best for the future. We have made him an honorary life member of the Association, in thanks for his many years of invariably cheerful and enthusiastic help and support to the ECA, as well as his great contributions to the improved state of nature on the Common and many other sites across the area covered by the Moles.

In July 2023 the Common was awarded its 17th successive Green Flag, which is flying over Stamford Green. The inspection visit for 2024 is arranged for early May.

Berry Pond, created in October 2022, survived its first summer without completely drying out, and is becoming established, with aquatic plants starting to appear. Please do help by keeping dogs out of the pond; stirred up sediment in the water blocks the light that plants depend upon, and neonicotinoids from flea treatments kill invertebrates. The electric fence was aligned so as to prevent cattle wading in during the grazing season.

We plan to use the significant funds remaining from the Dave Berry bequest to restore a pond near Bramble Walk. This was probably a clay pit for a nearby brickworks and is now badly overgrown by trees and rather silted. Despite this, a recent survey showed that newts do lay eggs there. Removal of some of the trees to increase light levels and reduce loss of water should improve the habitat for breeding amphibians and ensure that it remains suitable in years to come.

The small heronry on Great Pond seems to have become established, with several nests rearing chicks to fledging in 2023 and three nests, with at least seven increasingly active chicks, this year.

We were recently advised that Natural England (NE) has put the idea of a Thames to Downs "Super" National Nature Reserve on hold; efforts in this part of the country are apparently focussed on a similar project for the Surrey Heaths. This is of course a disappointment and EEBC continues to press the case for Epsom Common to be designated. One might think that should be relatively straightforward, given: the support of the landowner (EEBC); the many years since the application was submitted; the agreed favourable condition of the site; and the neighbouring Ashted Common NNR. However, in government it seems nothing is simple. We await the response from NE, but it may well become appropriate to exert what limited influence we have.

Following the renewal of work on the Borough Local Plan, we await the opportunity to review and make further comment as we consider appropriate.

As I hope you know, 2024 is the 50th anniversary of the founding of the ECA. As well as the talk at the AGM, we plan an exhibition about the Association, although this will not take place until later in the year. There will also be an Epsom Common Discovery Day on 7th July, intended to encourage all to learn a little more about the Common and its wildlife.

That a small organisation dedicated to the preservation and improvement of the Common has survived fifty years is a pleasing achievement. However, despite the number of members and level of activity, I am concerned about the future. The active members of the Association, particularly those of us who run it, are not particularly young. We need to start handing over to another generation, but currently see few candidates. We continue to attract reasonable numbers to conservation tasks, but other, perhaps less glamorous activities, such as: administration, publicity, responding to consultations, etc., are essential for the working of the Association. These currently depend on just a handful of individuals. So if you want the ECA to continue for more than the next few years, and have some time and energy to contribute, we would be delighted to hear from you. There are plenty of challenges to come from threats such as climate change and population pressure.

Lastly I thank you, the membership, for continuing to support the Association.

David King - April 2024