

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF MITCHAM COMMON CONSERVATORS
(A Statutory Corporation constituted by the Metropolitan Commons
(Mitcham) Supplemental Act 1891)
HELD ON WEDNESDAY 10th March 2021 AT 6.30 PM Via Zoom

Present:

Cllr. N. Draper (Chairman)
Mr. J. Cheetham
Ms A. Dines (present until 7:00pm)
Ms. A. Fairweather
Mr. M. Groves
Cllr. J. Henry
Mr. N.Jones
Cllr R. Makin

In Attendance:

Mr. R. Auld - Conservators' Investments Adviser
Mr. M. Boyle – Manager of Mitcham Common
Mr. P. Moorhouse - Warden
Mr. D. Napier - Leisure & Culture Greenspaces Manager, Merton
Ms. L. Parry – Minute taker

Absent:

Cllr. N. Degrads
Cllr. N. Garratt
Cllr. S. King
Cllr. A. Pelling
Cllr. C. Williams

1. Apologies for Absence

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. A particular welcome was given to Mr Norman Jones, in attendance for his first meeting.

Apologies for absence had been received from Cllr Williams and Cllr Garratt.

2. Declarations of Interest

Mr Maurice Groves asked for it to be noted that his 11 year old Grandson has been accepted to play golf on Mitcham Golf Club free of charge until the age of 15.

3. **Minutes (enclosed) of the last Meeting**

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed as an accurate account. However, the Manager asked for a change in wording as follows:

Pg 3 5.4 “ the existing High Court Injunction has been discharged on appeal. Merton Council intend to appeal this decision at a hearing date set for January 2021”

This was agreed.

4. **Matters Arising**

Pay Pal Link on the website: A facility for making donations via Pay Pal is set up and ready for the website. The Manager sought approval for the wording to accompany the link, as follows: 'Your donation helps the Conservators to promote the conservation and improvement of Mitcham Common'.

Q: Is there any scope for promoting this facility?

A: We can look at providing links to the website on any new signage/noticeboards

RESOLVED: Pay Pal link to go live with the agreed accompanying wording.

Dog Control Orders: The Manager reported that there had been overwhelming support for renewing the existing PSPO. There was a small majority in favour of a licensing scheme for people walking more than 4 dogs. However, the PSPO can't deal with a licensing scheme. Nevertheless there is not a current problem on Mitcham Common with people walking more than four dogs, and if it does become a problem, enforcement action will be taken.

Beddington Lane: The gas mains work is due to be completed by the end of March.

Appointment of a new member to Mitcham Common Environmental Trust. A new Sutton representative is required. Mr Norman Jones was nominated for appointment and accepted the position. A meeting would take place immediately following the current meeting.

RESOLVED: Mr Norman Jones confirmed as a new appointment to the Environmental Trust.

5. **Friends of Mitcham Common -To report on recent activities and to raise any relevant matters**

Conservators were in receipt of a report and a number of questions from the Friends. Responses after each question were given and agreed by all Conservators:

'Membership Secretary Melanie Nunzet report for March 2021 Conservators ' meeting

This is the first Friends' Report since March 2020 but that does not mean we have not been busy.

As we have reported by email and in the Magpie newsletter our membership has grown considerably due to Covid which has meant many more people have discovered the Common on their doorstep and grown to love it. Last year we gained 35 new Friends and already in 2021 we have welcomed 12 more on board. Currently, we have 254 paid-up Friends on our mailing list. Several Friends who used to receive the Magpie by hand have since provided an email address and have come back on board which is good news.

Between the lockdowns the Valiant Litter Picker Group have been busy collecting litter and many Friends have continued to litter pick individually. We are very much looking forward to picking together again when restrictions are lifted.

Regarding the extensive tree felling by Seven Islands Pond in January the Friends were surprised that there was no prior warning given to them by the Manager. We looked on the Conservators' website afterwards and read about the acid grassland project in the Manager's Report for the December 2020 Meeting. However, as stated below, the Friends' Committee did not receive any papers or even an invitation to this meeting. It was embarrassing for us to be unaware of this issue as we could have forewarned the many Friends who were shocked by the loss of these trees and wrote to us accordingly.

Manager's response:

In October the Friends requested news items for their forthcoming Magpie newsletter. Details of the second phase of the acid grassland restoration project were provided. Other news items sent to the Friends included the new path at Mitcham Garden Village, details of the SGN works along Beddington Lane, PSPO consultation and discharge of High Court Injunction. The newsletter was published in December 2020.

We were also disappointed not to be consulted or informed prior to the fish destocking at Seven and One Island Ponds and the Friends only received an email from the Manager on the very day that the first pond was being cleared.

Manager's response:

The Friends were consulted on this proposal in late 2018 and then advised that the decision to destock both ponds would be put on hold until after Summer 2020. In September 2020 the Board confirmed their decision to destock and at the end of January the Friends were advised that destocking would take place within the next few weeks.

The specific dates were not, and will not, be advertise because to do so would risk inviting an audience at a time when lockdown restrictions still apply. One Island Pond was destocked in early February and Seven Islands Pond will be destocked before the end of March.

We note that we have not replied to the Conservators' response to our Bidder Memorial planting application. Here is the text of the reply from the Manager which we received last October:

Dear Friends of Mitcham Common

Bidder Memorial Proposed Planting Project

I refer to your email to the Mitcham Common Conservators dated 28 August 2020

'The Conservators welcome your interest in undertaking a project at the Bidder Memorial. However, they are of the view that the planting proposed is not appropriate or in keeping with the surrounding vegetation. Regrettably, the Conservators cannot therefore agree to your proposal.

The Conservators feel that a more appropriate project would be for the Friends to undertake the annual maintenance of the ground at the base of the Memorial and slope to the railings. If this is a project the Friends might be willing to undertake then I will provide more detail.

On a related matter, the Conservators are considering removing the railings at the Bidder Memorial and would be interested in your comments on this matter'.

Naturally, we were sorry that our request was refused and sadly we cannot get very excited about just doing maintenance. Regarding the railings the Committee did consult with a number of Friends, including Janet's sons and George Parker Bidder's great grandson. The conclusion was reached that the railings form part of the landscape and that they should remain.

Manager's response:

At the end of October 2020 the Friends confirmed that they were interested, in principle, in undertaking annual maintenance tasks in the vicinity of the Memorial. The Manager wrote to Chair of Friends in March 2021 asking that the Friends confirm that they are still interested, as yet there has been no reply.

Friends were also advised at the end of October 2020 that the Board would be informed of their views concerning the railings. The Board decided at their December meeting not to remove the railings.

We regret that there is such poor communication from the Conservators to the Friends. We are quite literally in daily contact with users of Mitcham Common, and regularly find ourselves fielding queries and questions which we cannot answer simply because of poor information flows. We ask that the Conservators take a more proactive approach in communicating with us on activities happening on the Common, so that we in turn can share this information with Common users. We are happy to discuss how to put better communication methods in place - please can the Chair of the Conservators contact us about this?

Manager's response:

The Friends will continue to be consulted on major projects on the Common and advised of other works prior to said works commencing. However the Friends have previously advised that the main point of contact between the Conservators and the Friends should be the Secretary of the Friends. Their Secretary resigned in September 2020 and to date the Conservators have not been informed of a replacement or who should be the main point of contact in the absence of a secretary.

On this subject we are not sure that we ever received a satisfactory response to what we said at the end of our March 2020 report:

There is never any suggestion of working together and we feel we are only useful to the Conservators when there is a consultation process and our views are needed, for example, the fish de-stocking poll and the new acid grassland project.

Manager's response:

Consultation on major projects and seeking the Friends' comments on other matters and informing them of works to be undertaken are all examples of 'working together'. The Conservators supported the Friends proposed open day, but unfortunately the Friends were unable to satisfy the reasonable funding requirement of the Education Trust. The Conservators are very grateful and supportive of the Friends litter-picking and will continue to discuss the suitability of projects proposed by the Friends.

Questions for the Conservators (from Committee)

- 1) We are planning to hold our Open Day to celebrate Janet's life and inaugurate the new bench this year or in 2022 when Covid restrictions are lifted. We are asking the Conservators to let us know the cost of hiring the Ecology Centre on a Saturday from 12 to 6 pm.

Manager's response:

This information has already been provided to the Friends

The story behind this is that we were encouraged by the Chair to submit a grant application to the Mitcham Common Education Trust which we did last June. It was suggested that we ask for £5000. A few interested Friends spent a great deal of time and effort in putting the application together but it did not meet the expected standards. We then decided to ask for £400 to simplify the process and just cover the hire of the Ecology Centre with something left over to pay for speakers and refreshments. However, even this was fraught with issues and after extensive email correspondence between the Committee and the Manager/Chair we decided not to pursue the application. We are all volunteers and were spending a huge amount of time on what could have been a simple exercise of collaboration. We feel sad that the Conservators were not willing to support our plans to run this event in the way we wanted to. We are now considering other ways of funding the Open Day.

Manager's response:

The Conservators advised that the Friends' proposal would be forwarded to the Mitcham Common Education Trust. The Trust confirmed that they would grant funding on condition that the Event provided environmental education for young children (as promoted in the Friends' original project proposal). Unfortunately the Friends seem unable to meet this requirement.

- 2) Is there any news on a Management Plan please? Many new Friends are concerned that there is no collaboration between the Conservators and the Friends as evidenced by the points above.

Manager's response:

This is currently in preparation. There will be a consultation draft later this year.

- 3) We would like to know why we were not sent an invitation or any papers to the Conservators' Meetings in September and December 2020.

Manager's response:

The September meeting was Members only to allow social distancing. The Friends have previously advised that the main point of contact between the Conservators and the

Friends should be the Secretary of the Friends. Their Secretary resigned in September 2020 and to date the Conservators have not been advised of a replacement or who should be the main point of contact in the absence of a Secretary. However, the Chair of Friends is invited to the March meeting and until advised otherwise will be invited to future MCC meetings.

- 4) We would like to request having signs provided in the areas when there is large scale tree felling relating to acid grassland (or other) projects taking place. The idea behind this is to inform the public whenever trees are felled as to the reasons why, with an explanation of what the plans are for those particular areas once the trees are down. That might educate the public as to why acid grassland projects are important (rare habitats etc) and therefore also lessen the number of queries to the Friends or the Manager. The signs might also include a link to the Mitcham Common website, where there is further information. The signs could be taken down once felled trees are removed. Perhaps a project timeline could also be included.

Manager's response:

Agreed. Temporary signs will be posted for future major projects.

- 5) The question was raised with Martin Boyle, to enquire if an extra litter bin could be placed in the area of felled trees, as this has already become a popular place for children to play and adults to sit. Sadly, this is producing quite a lot of litter in the area, which Dr Jean Mooney checks and clears away on a daily basis.
- Martin Boyle replied that there was no need for a bin by the newly felled trees as they were to be moved, in order for the top soil to be scraped off at a future date, to facilitate the restoration of the acid grassland.
 - Our question is: Can the Manager please tell the Friends when and where these trees will be moved to?
 - If possible, we would prefer that the majority of the felled trees were left on the Common, near where they currently lie, so that they can provide a home for wildlife and a play area for children.
 - Also we suggest that some of the felled trunks be used to block off the various access points to the Common so that walkers, buggies and wheelchairs can still gain access but motorbikes are thereby prevented?

Manager's response:

The trunks will be used to create wildlife habitats, including stag beetle loggeries at various location in the Seven Islands Pond Sub-Site. Leaving them in situ as a play area

will restrict the opportunities for acid grassland restoration, which was the aim of the project. The Manager will consider suggestions from the Friends as to where trunks could be used to prevent motorbike access. Any suggestions should be forwarded by the end of April 2021.

- 6) Regarding the increasing use of motorbikes and quad bikes on the Common, often quite aggressively, many new Friends are asking why there is no signage making it clear that it is not allowed. Nobody reads the Byelaws posters which are displayed and most users of the Common are unaware that it is forbidden to cycle or ride motorbikes. The police have been very helpful by responding to our calls and attending when they can but they are fighting a losing battle.'

Manager's response:

Appropriate signage will be considered.

During discussion Conservators agreed that it was disappointing that Friends felt that communication was not working well, Conservators were always keen to ensure that there are good and positive channels of communication and the Chairman re-iterated that the Friends are highly valued and their work is of great importance. It was agreed that the Manager will write to Martin Welton, copying in Melanie Nunzet, to ask if they could confirm who the Friends wish to be the point of contact following the resignation of the Secretary last year. As previously stated the Chair had been invited to the current meeting.

The Manager said that he would also like to propose sending a regular bulletin to the nominated contact within the Friends at the end of every month giving an update on relevant issues relating to the Common.

RESOLVED: Manager to write to Martin Welton to confirm who communications should be sent to within the Friends. Manager to begin producing a monthly bulletin logging all relevant information, current activities etc relating to Mitcham Common to help keep Friends informed.

6. Investments Portfolio (enclosed for Members)- Report from Mr Auld

Mr Auld reported that in the context of the world pandemic and the impact on the markets, the Conservators' portfolio has held up reasonably well. The portfolio is composed with a significant portion of fixed interest assets, so this has ensured stability.

Mr Auld said that he would like to propose that Conservators invest £19,500 in a UK company Primary Health Properties, which is involved in building of health centres in the UK and receives rental income from government agencies, presenting a low risk, with 4 1/4% yield.

RESOLVED: Conservators agreed unanimously to the recommendation that £19,500 is invested in Primary Health Properties and authorised Mr Auld to take this forwards.

Ms Anne Fairweather raised with Mr Auld that Conservators were keen to look at the portfolio with a view to ensuring that investments in the long term meet environmental and carbon neutral specifications. Mr Auld said that he was very happy to help and give ideas. Mr Auld noted that wind power may be a good consideration for investment.

RESOLVED: Anne Fairweather to lead with an environmental/carbon neutral focus in investments in liaison with Mr Auld and Mr Martin Boyle and report back at future meetings.

7. Annual Programme of Meetings 2021/22 – Proposed dates

Spring Inspection: Sunday 23rd May 2021
June Board Meeting: Wednesday 9th June 2021
Annual Inspection: Sunday 19th September 2021
September Board Meeting: Wednesday 22nd September 2021
December Board Meeting: Wednesday 1st December 2021
March Board Meeting: Wednesday 9th March 2022

The proposed dates were noted and **agreed**. Details about the next Spring Inspection would be sent nearer the time.

8. Wandle Valley Regional Park Trust

Mr John Cheetham reported that there had been a meeting of the Trust on 21st January 2021 where it was acknowledged that there are currently no resources, funding or assets. Mr Cheetham said that he would provide further updates as and when he has any information.

9. Date of Next Meeting Wednesday 9th June 2021

10. Any Other Business None