

FRIENDS OF BECKENHAM PLACE PARK



AUTUMN NEWSLETTER 2018 No.86

From the Chair

Welcome to the Autumn edition of the Friends Newsletter which, as usual, is packed with information about Beckenham Place Park that we hope you will find of interest. Perhaps the most important development in the park's regeneration is the news that the Environment Agency is not proceeding with the Flood Alleviation Scheme in the eastern sector of the park. "The Lewisham Council website states: *The Environment Agency worked on developing this project for several years, and involved us in the plans. We were keen to make sure that the flood scheme would result in a better park for everyone to enjoy. In July 2018, the Environment Agency decided that the scheme had become too expensive to provide good value for money. As the project developed, the flood modelling showed that the flood alleviation may not be as effective as first hoped, and their estimated costs of delivering the scheme increased dramatically. The Environment Agency decided that the scheme is unaffordable because the cost increase resulted in a significant funding gap.*

Unfortunately, now that the Environment Agency's flood scheme is no longer going ahead, we have to begin again in terms of developing designs and securing funding for the east side of the park. Work on this new project is now beginning and we are working hard to get funding and engage partners to make sure we make the most of this part of Beckenham Place Park for many years to come."

Basically this means the Eastern side of the park will receive no investment at all, as all of the money from the HLF is going on the Western area, with the lake, homestead restoration and creating a pleasure ground. So no toilets, refreshment area or improved playground. Elsewhere in this newsletter is an account of the Open House event at the Mansion and park in September with progress reports on the homestead renovation and lake creation.

The Friends have been approached by a local resident who is keen to open up the fenced off pond. She is currently getting quotes for the work that needs to be carried out and if anyone has suggestions on fundraising or can offer help, please email juletchalk@btinternet.com who I am sure will be delighted to hear from you.

(1)

We have been busy this summer, staffing the visitor centre every Sunday, working with volunteers on the sensory garden as well as organising a range of well-attended free walks around the park. Membership of the Friends is currently free of charge and if you know of neighbours and friends who might be interested in joining, please encourage them to do so.

Open House at the Park.

Lewisham Council organised an Open House event at the Park on Sunday 23rd September. Unfortunately the weather was awful in the morning with heavy rain and wind. But by lunchtime the sun had come out and so had plenty of visitors. The Mansion was open for everyone to explore, including the attics which aren't normally accessible. Downstairs, visitors were entertained with excellent live music with the whole thing overseen by John Cator and a couple of his friends! There were a number of different tours around the park, including a look at the Homestead restoration and catching up with progress at the lake. Even the trees made a special contribution, when a mighty oak tree crashed to the ground mid-afternoon. Nobody was hurt.

The Homestead

The Homestead was originally the 18th century stable block, with a terrace of 3 cottages and a stable yard and has been put to a number of different uses over the years. It was the subject of an arson attack some years ago and has remained derelict since then. The first task was to make the building safe and most of the shoring-up scaffolding will soon be removed. The building is being sympathetically restored, using appropriate materials. The old clock tower has been rebuilt and will be kitted out with a new clock (based on old photos) and topped with the original weather vane, re-gilded with gold leaf. In one of the rooms, a brick floor has been uncovered and this will be protected. The Homestead will be transformed into a café with terrace and an education centre. The three cottages will be leased to businesses. The contractors believe the Homestead will be ready for use by May next year.

(2)

The Lake

The lake is being constructed on part of the footprint of the original artificial 18th century water feature. At 200 by 50 metres, there is a considerable amount of earth to move to create a lake which will be 3.5 metres at its deepest part. The work was hampered by the discovery of small amounts of asbestos, and this will be moved to other areas of the park and made safe. It had been planned to use soil from the excavations to create a mounded garden near the railway track but this will not be happening, as the earth isn't suitable for this type of construction. Instead it will be used in various places in the park and also to raise an area near the lake as a viewing platform. A borehole has been sunk, capable of producing 9 litres of water per second. The lake will need at least 17m litres of water to fill it. A shallow sandy beach area will be created, along with a wooden jetty.

Car Park

The new car park is nearing completion. With 104 spaces, the aim is to make the front of the mansion a car-free area. The car park has been dug down and protected by earthworks so that cars are hidden from view when approaching the mansion by the drive.

EVENTS

October - Sunday 14th Fungi Walk

1.30pm from Mansion steps

Dr Mark Spencer has led several fascinating fungi walks in the park. This is not to collect edible fungi but to be amazed at the variety found.

November - Saturday 10th Bird Spotting

9.30am from Mansion steps

David da Silva is a regular visitor to the park and a very knowledgeable 'birder'.

January - Saturday 19th 2019 Bromley RSPB Walk

9.30am from Mansion steps

This is a local Bromley RSPB Walk led by David Hampson and Liz Anderson, to which we are invited. The large green space of the park is a perfect location (3)

for spotting winter visitors such as fieldfares and redwings. Details of local RSPB activities can be found on their website: rspb.org.uk/groups/Bromley. Don't forget the Big Garden Birdwatch at the end of January!

All events commence from the Mansion steps and at the allotted times, unless indicated otherwise. They are free but donations are always welcome. Dogs can come if well behaved and on a lead. It is advisable to wear stout shoes and dress suitably for the weather.

EVENT REPORTS

Listening Walk 21st June 2018

Seven of us walked quietly around the park without being engaged in conversation – a hard task at first, but it is amazing what the senses picked up. Smells of fungi and blossom, the massive size of some of the trees, Spotted Wood butterflies crossing their territories near the railway bridge, a crow attacking a pigeon, bird songs, the many planes overhead and traffic noise on Beckenham Hill Road, the beautiful clouds, the brilliant green water of the deep pond which is choked with duckweed, many scented herbs in the sensory garden and, this year, we also came across mountains of excavated earth everywhere and the trackways of machinery.

Thank you Beryl, for helping us to see the park around us in a different light.
Glenys

Bat, Moth and Astronomy walk 28th July 2018

After weeks of intense temperatures with no rain and then thunderstorms on the previous day, we had luckily one good day before more rain the next day. Unfortunately clouds built up through the evening, allowing only a small glimpse of the moon and Jupiter.

Around forty of us collected and bat detectors were dispensed. Ishpi gave an excellent and informative account of the natural history of bats. Did you know that a diminutive bat can live for thirty years! Then the walk commenced over the meadows, where a few bats were detected, and into the woods. The new proposed wet woodland area, which has been opened up by the removal of many trees, proved very productive with lots of bat activity. The younger members of the walk were expert at spotting them flying!! (4)

The meadows adjacent to the river Ravensbourne were quite windy and therefore bat activity was sparse. As we left the meadows and headed towards Ravensbourne Station there was a great deal of activity in the wooded/scrubby area between our track and the railway lines. Lots of feeding buzzes were heard. So this sheltered spot was obviously full of insects.

Everyone appreciated the walk. Only two species of bat were detected (although more species are in the park). We heard the Common Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) and the Soprano Pipistrelle (*P.pygmaeus*).

We arrived back at the spot where Bill had set up his moth trap (a Skinner type, a box with 15 watt actinic strip light). The pipistrelles had been flying overhead here too, maybe dining on insects attracted to our light.

We then entered the world of micro moths – Dingy Footman, Diamond Backed, Mother of Pearl, etc. Full details of all insects trapped, plus photos, appear on our website.

It had been a fascinating couple of hours in the magical quiet of a woodland evening and very many thanks must go to Ishpi Blatchley, Bill Welch and Mal Mitchell for their interest and enthusiasm and for giving up a Saturday evening.

Sensory Garden Workdays 2nd and 4th Saturdays of each month from 10am to midday

Our regular team of volunteers has been continuing to maintain the sensory garden in spite of the harsh dry conditions this summer. Some plants have suffered more than others but after a bit of rain the brown patches are recovering. We have up to a dozen volunteers but more are very welcome. You don't have to know anything about gardening as tools, guidance and advice are provided. Tasks vary from weeding and planting, pruning, composting, mowing etc. You can contact us via the Friends email address for more information. The formal garden area will shortly be 'remodelled' under the Lottery Grant scheme so the gardens will be closed for the duration of those works. We are trying to arrange access so that we can perform once a month workdays to keep on top of necessary tasks.

Friends' Visitor Centre at Beckenham Place Park

If you are of an inquisitive nature and keen to find out more about the park you should come along to the Friends' Visitor Centre and spend time amongst the many items gathered over the years. Here, using our rich collection of historic maps, documents, photographs and much more you can discover how the Mansion, park buildings, parkland and surrounding local area looked in past times. Going even further back in time, we have geological specimens, which include a lump of conglomerate. This was fossilised millions of years ago, laid down in the shallow sea which used to cover the park area. Our 'skeleton table' is always popular, especially with children, who enjoy speculating about the different specimens. The sheep's skull, with its wobbly teeth, is handled with both great care and interest but is surprisingly light. We have bird nests to examine and marvel over or, as in the case of the pigeon nest, to question how its original tenants survived in such a flimsy structure! We have many samples of different woods and a huge slice from an elm which was a victim of Dutch Elm disease in 1975. It is annotated, using the rings of growth as a guide to all the more interesting historical event which have occurred during its lifetime. There is a 'touchy-feely' table with loads of natural items from the park for children to mull over and examine with a magnifying glass. Some children prefer to use the microscope and slides of items such as a house fly leg or a moth antennae, easily stimulating the young scientist's interest. Younger children can spend time in our small but very cosy childrens' corner, where there are opportunities to sketch items of interest from the park or just to play with some toys whilst the grown-ups continue their exploration. As space is limited in the room, we have tried to make good use of the very high walls and looking upwards you will see some fascinating Victorian tools from the old stable block – tools which relied more on manpower than those of today, which are powered by electricity and batteries. It would take too long to list all the items in our room so visit us, peer into our cabinet of curiosities, admire the old china dug up in a garden by the park and examine items abandoned from a theatre collection which was once intended for a museum inside the Mansion. Then, at the back of the room and standing guard over all these treasures, is one of the two statues which used to stand in the alcoves on the front porch. She adds tranquillity to the room. If only she could talk and tell us about all the visitors she has seen since Georgian times. But she can't, so we shall just have to use our imagination and all the artefacts in the Visitor Centre to form our own conclusions.

The Visitor Centre is open Sundays 12-3.30 pm

(6)

A Little bit of History – Lost and Found (by Mal Mitchell)



After being content with the History of Beckenham Place written by Eric Inman in the mid 1990's I decided to look more closely at some clues and comments he made. I'm not criticising Eric as he made an interesting account of the available information. But I'm looking more closely at the early origins of the Park. Eric had noted that the land on which the Park stands was mainly in the Manor of Foxgrove and not Manor of Beckenham, with which I concur fully. Some other clues led us to rediscover lost maps including this one of the Manor of

Foxgrove in the British Library which support that and also push back the date of the earliest origins of the Park to 1760 rather than the broadly recorded 1773. The evidence of the maps has been viewed previously but not analysed in the same way, or not discovered to have been? It is noteworthy that John Cator had land in the Beckenham area which allowed him to make exchanges with Jones Raymond and Peter Burrell (other landlords in the area) in 1760. John Cator's father in law the eminent Botanist and Quaker Peter Collinson comments that John 'built a fine stately house at Stumpshall between 1760 and 1762' (*Hortus Collinsonianus*). However, if that is the earliest origin of the park other evidence reveals that other parts of the park did not come into John Cator's possession until 1777 and later. He could though enclose his Park in 1785 by diverting the Beckenham to Southend road and making the old road his Park Drive.

Research also reveals that though the park and house is 'credited' with being built in 1773 when Cator bought the Manor of Beckenham from Viscount Bolingbroke that that process was fraught with problems for Cator. Cator was already well established at Stumpshall by that time(13 years). Bolingbroke had already arranged a lease and loan deal with Hans Winthrop Mortimer and Mrs Margaret Hare for Beckenham Manor lands in order to raise cash for his extravagant lifestyle. Cator was unaware of that arrangement and had to enter into several

court cases to gain full ownership of the Beckenham Manor land possibly not until 1780 when he compensated Mrs. Hare for her losses through the deal with Bolingbroke. To clear up some confusion, the old manor house for Beckenham which was opposite St. George's Church had been passed into the possession of the Burrells in 1759 from Bolingbroke so Cator never had possession of it. Thus when he became Lord of the Manor he needed Beckenham Place as his base. All this and a lot more is explained on the Friends website history page and I am occasionally adding or editing the content as other material comes to light.

We would love to hear what you think of the park and any memories you have. Contact us on bpp.friends@hotmail.co.uk and look us up on www.beckenhamplaceparkfriends.org.uk

There is also a lot going on in the mansion which is organised by Lewisham, please google Beckenham Place Park Mansion

Update on RJK lease of the Mansion.

RJK have a lease on the Mansion which runs until the end of this September. They have done a good job of keeping The Mansion open to the public, providing overnight security as well as bringing in a small income from events and letting some of the rooms. They have also allowed The Friends to keep our Visitor Centre in the Mansion. They were told that they would probably get a 3 or 5 year extension to the lease. Lewisham council have now decided that they will only get a 6 to 9 month extension (causing uncertainty to their tenants and to us). Lewisham are to commence a tendering process in January for potential leases on The Mansion, the newly re-furbished Homesteads and possibly the old Foxgrove building. It also gives Lewisham a chance to waste more money on the tendering process. At this stage it is difficult to know where the Visitor Centre will be in the future assuming it still exists. We are not overly popular with some of Lewisham council as we have not been great fans of their tree felling policy or of their re-introduction of those 18th century sports of BMX & MTB biking. -Roger

Websites of interest

Lewisham Local History Society

website www.lewishamhistory.org.uk

Bromley Local History

website www.blhs.org.uk

Ravensbourne Valley Preservation Society

website www.rvpsbromley.org