

Mitcham Common

*A short history by
Janet Morris*



Acknowledgements

This history was originally produced by the Mitcham Common Preservation Society as an exhibition to mark the centenary of the Metropolitan Commons (Mitcham) Supplemental Act 1891. It was converted into a permanent display in 2008 with the help of a grant from the Mitcham Common Conservators. Friends of London Road Playing Fields generously sponsored this publication in booklet form. I am very grateful for all this help.

The text has inevitably drawn heavily on works published by Mr Eric Montague, namely, 'The History of Mitcham Common' in 1970 and 'Mitcham Common' in 2001. I am grateful also for his personal assistance. Lastly I would like to thank Mr Geoffrey Norris, Clerk to the Conservators from 1984 - 2006, for his help and advice over many years.

Janet Morris



The Bidder Memorial.

In memory of George Parker Bidder, whose work
ensured the survival of Mitcham Common
for the enjoyment of the people.

The memorial can be seen from Croydon Road, not far from the roundabout.

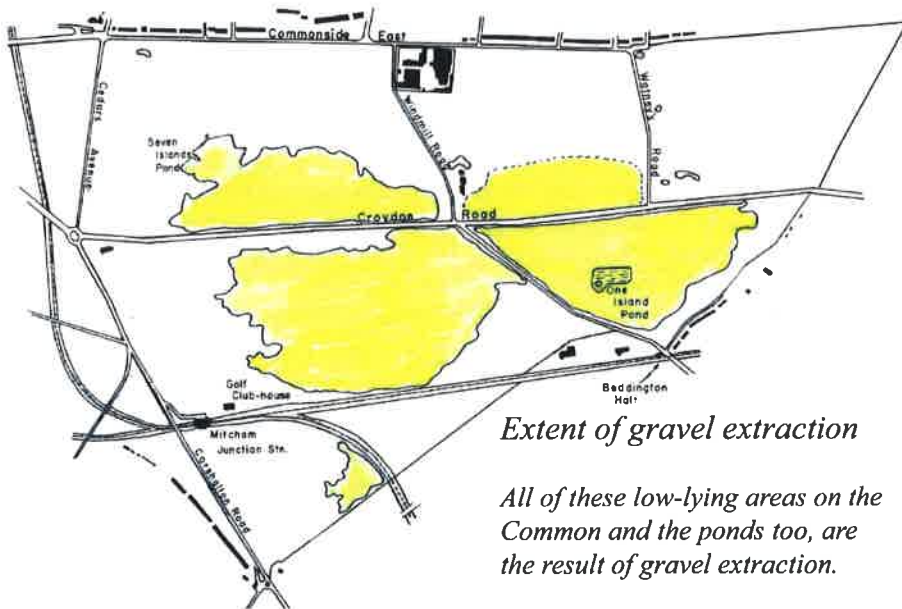
Mitcham Common

Part I 1891 – 1991

In the beginning Mitcham Common was completely flat. Its poor acid soils lie over river gravels and are infertile. For generations the area provided only rough grazing, firewood and turf. The gorse was much valued for bread ovens as it burns fast and fiercely.

Gravel extraction

In the 19th century gravel extraction for road building became very profitable and the scale of operations increased steadily as new pumps and machinery were developed.



Legal protection organised

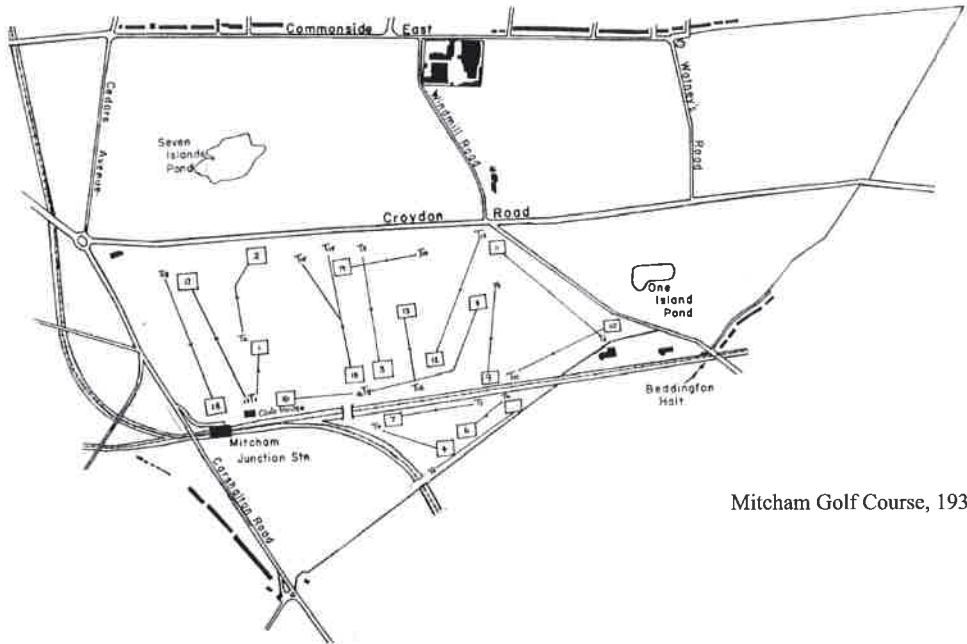
George Parker Bidder, a successful barrister, watched with growing dismay the damage done to the Common by gravel extraction and turf digging and he called a public meeting. Here he was asked to organise the legal framework to establish an independent Board of Conservators to manage the Common and this was completed in 1891.

In 1896, Bidder died unexpectedly after a street accident and a monument (see opposite page) was erected in gratitude for his work to preserve the Common.



George Parker Bidder M.A., Q.C.
1836 - 1896.

Golf course reduced in size



Mitcham Golf Course, 1931

Mitcham Golf Club

A new club was established in 1925, embracing the Village Club as well, but its income was not sufficient to maintain such a large course. In 1931, when there was a proposal to repeal the 1891 Act as unworkable, golf retreated to the south of Croydon Road – reducing the course to a mere shadow of its former glory.



The new clubhouse, later extended.



Birch, brambles and gorse – early colonists.

Local people resented the way golf had taken over the Common and were pleased to see it reduced in size. They were not prepared for the changes that followed. The Conservators now had far more common land to care for and no more money. The Common was rapidly invaded by brambles, hawthorn bushes and trees and people complained endlessly.

Financial problems surface

Mitcham Common is the surviving part of a much larger Common and the land entrusted to the Conservators included six isolated greens.

Mitcham Council takes over the greens

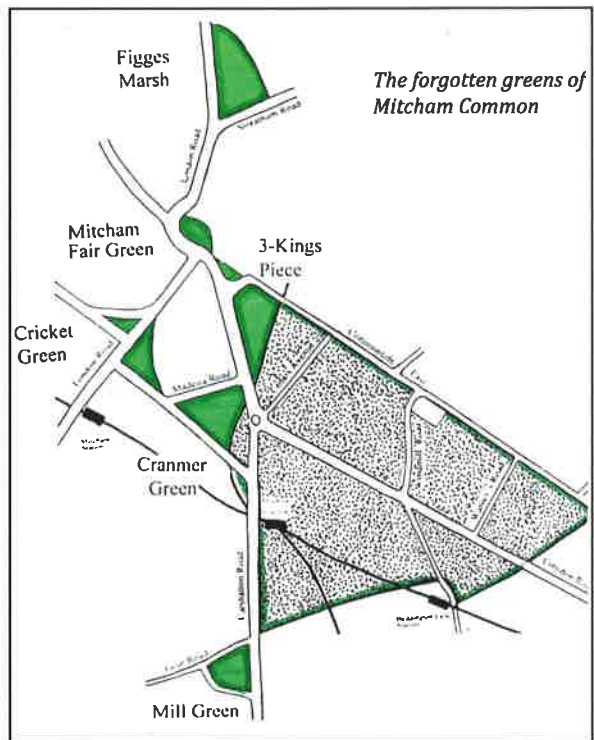
The five greens in Mitcham were vested in Mitcham Urban District Council when it was set up in 1923. They are maintained by the Council (now Merton) but they still enjoy the same legal protection as the main body of the Common. They are an asset to be treasured.

These five greens are: Mitcham Upper Green (Fair Green); Mitcham Lower Green (Cricket Green); Canons Piece (Cranmer Green); 3-Kings Piece and Figges Marsh. The sixth green, Mill Green, lies in Sutton.

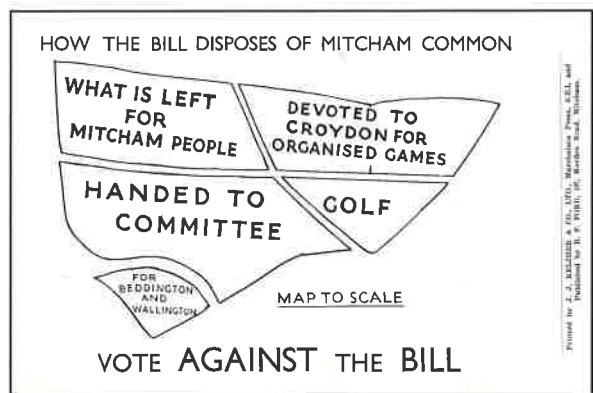
1931. Partition of the Common proposed

Even with this help the Conservators could not manage the Common properly. Repeal of the 1891 Act was seriously considered to allow other methods of maintaining the Common. The Mitcham Urban District Council Bill was drafted in 1931 to transfer power from the Conservators to local Government. Golf would be restricted to land south of Croydon Road and the rest of the Common would come under the direct control of Mitcham Urban District Council. Mill Green which lies outside the Mitcham boundary was to be the responsibility of Beddington and Wallington Council, and Croydon Council would maintain the eastern corner where they had laid out football pitches.

People were alarmed that the 1891 Act would be repealed. They wanted to retain its legal protection to keep Mitcham Common a natural place and not to become urbanised like Streatham and Tooting commons. They particularly resented land being given to Croydon for football pitches and possibly a new link road.



Public meetings prompted an official poll and the Bill was rejected. This may have saved the Common from partition but it did not solve the Conservators' problems. They were left to battle on whilst people worried about the looming war with Germany.



Protest pamphlet circulated in opposition to the proposed Mitcham Urban District Council Bill.

The war years



The Home Guard trained extensively on the Common and posts were erected on the more open parts to prevent airborne invasion in 1940.



Fields either side of Cedars Avenue.

Dig for Victory

Large areas of Mitcham Common were ploughed up during the Second World War. There were potato fields east of Watney's Road and cereals and other crops either side of Cedars Avenue and also on the 3-Kings Piece. Normally, commons are too poor for agriculture but using modern fertilisers good crops were grown. The land opposite Walton Way was also let out for allotments to encourage private efforts. Three years after the war the land was returned, bare and flat and it became an obvious candidate for 'improvement' later (i.e. controlled tipping).

Bombing

Large and small bomb craters are scattered over the Common. The most devastating damage occurred in 1941 when two landmines fell along Commonsides East. Fifteen members of the Home Guard were killed when one fell on the Windmill Road trading estate, where they had their base. Their memorial plaque is with the British Legion.

The Gun Site

Land south of Mitcham Junction Station was commandeered for anti-aircraft gun emplacements. This was a massive installation, difficult and expensive to remove. It lingered on, derelict and occupied by squatters until it was demolished in 1964. An associated searchlight station lay behind the windmill and after the war one of the Nissen huts was converted into an office for the warden and changing rooms for footballers.

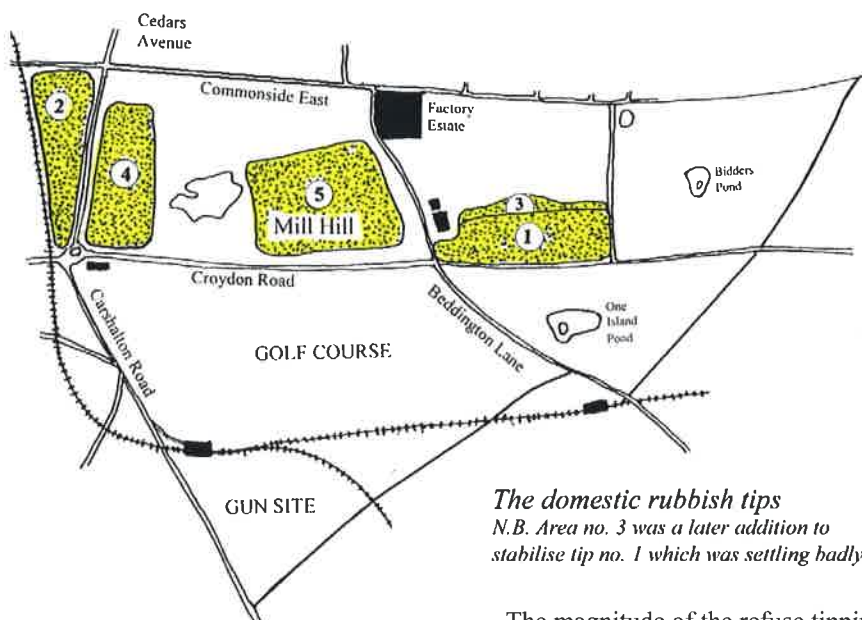


The Gun Emplacements.

Tipping of domestic rubbish 1947–1963

As the population grew the disposal of domestic waste became a huge problem. Since the nearest landfill site was at Reigate, Croydon Council saw Mitcham Common as an attractive alternative. They offered, 'at no cost to the Conservators' to tip on a wet site by the Croydon Road, raising and flattening the surface to make it suitable for sports, especially football. 'Controlled tipping' of this sort was much in vogue at the time and many open spaces including Morden Hall Park were 'improved' by tipping.

At first this was a legal operation, improving a notoriously wet part of the Common that flooded most winters, but it set a precedent and once tipping started it got out of hand. Both Merton and Sutton joined in and from 1947 to 1963 large areas of the Common were covered. The very dubious legality of these later tips was apparently never questioned except by local residents. There is no way that they could be construed as improving the Common.



The domestic rubbish tips

N.B. Area no. 3 was a later addition to stabilise tip no. 1 which was settling badly.

The magnitude of the refuse tipping shocked local people and even worse, the first tip soon started oozing foul liquids that polluted surrounding land. Fierce public complaint erupted and land drains were laid, thereby robbing the Common of water.

Pinnock's Pond and the plague of mosquitoes

Drainage water from the tip alongside Cedars Avenue polluted Pinnock's Pond and a nearby roadside ditch along Commonsides East. The pond was emptied in an effort to stop the terrible smell and the tip was closed. For years afterwards the pond bred plagues of mosquitoes that made summer evenings a misery for people over a wide area, stretching as far as Mitcham Park. The pond was eventually filled in.



The last tip. The base of Mill Hill.

Landscaping

The Conservators were now relieved of day-to-day maintenance problems but it left them little room for independent action. They urgently needed another source of income. A large Sunday market was considered but planning permission for this was refused. The solution finally selected was 'Landscaping'.

In 1977, the Conservators proposed raising £60,000 by making three 30ft. hills on the area beyond Watney's Road. This was a massive project starting with gravel extraction and then infilling with builders' rubble and earth, some of it chalk. A plan was drawn up with the hills facing Commonsides East. Furious local residents and the Preservation Society were strongly opposed and the plan was rejected at a public meeting.

A revised plan was put forward in 1978 with the hills now parallel to Watney's Road. A second public meeting was arranged and the plan was accepted - but the advertisement in the local paper was so obscure that only seven people turned up. The Preservation Society was devastated to miss this meeting and, utterly disheartened, the society folded.

Three large hills were later proposed for the One Island Pond site, which is not overlooked by any housing, and plans were passed almost without public notice.

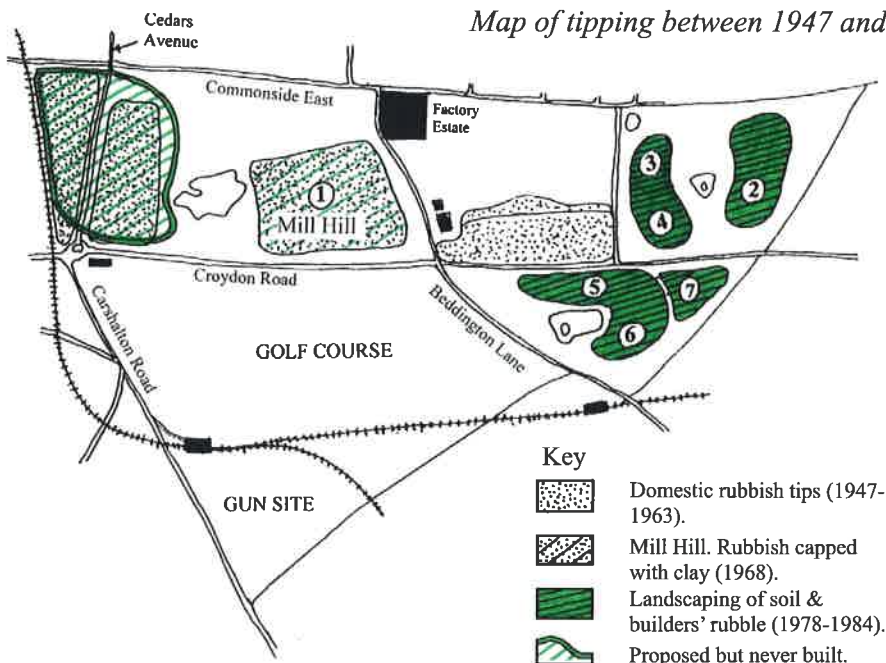
More landscaping planned in 1984

This was a really ambitious scheme with potential profits in the region of £100,000. It would finally have solved the Conservators' financial problems. Cedars Avenue was to be closed completely and the whole area between the railway and Seven Islands Pond covered to make four new hills 35 - 40 feet high. The pond itself would be landscaped and nearly doubled in size.

Massive protest

Mitcham people had had enough. During the last 50 years, area after area had disappeared under rubbish of one sort or another and they were determined that this should stop. A huge public protest welled up which ended in a very heated public meeting in March 1984. The scheme was withdrawn and no more hills were built.

Map of tipping between 1947 and 1984



Part II

Update 1991 – 2010

This history was originally prepared as an exhibition, presented by the Mitcham Common Preservation Society in 1993, to mark the anniversary of the Metropolitan Commons Supplemental Act 1891. Written from their perspective, it also celebrated the efforts of local people to keep the Common in a wild and natural state for the pleasure of all.

As time passed it became clear that several public-spirited people had joined the Board of Conservators in the hope that they could change things for the better. We owe them a great debt for the success of their work in recent years, particularly Councillor W E R (Ron) Haddow who served on the Board for 28 years and was chairman from 1990 to 1999.

Battling with severe financial problems, Councillor Vincent Talbot finally had to sacrifice a part of the Common in 1978 to raise money to preserve the whole. This 'Landscaping' project was greatly resented by local people but, in fact, it proved to be the salvation of the Common as the Conservators now have enough money to employ a qualified warden to undertake the necessary work. The value of the investment income does fluctuate, however, depending on the economic climate and it plunged dramatically after the banking crisis in 2008. The hills, designed by Mr J. G. (Jim) Berry, have created a new landscape that is an increasingly attractive legacy.

Readjustment

When the tips and the landscaped hills were finished the Common seemed permanently spoiled. But over time, vegetation changes to suit new soils and local conditions - a slow process that may take 50 years or more.

The domestic rubbish tips made in the 50s and 60s have settled and most of the banks have become covered in shrubs and trees. Today they are much less obvious. Only the bare banks alongside Cedars Avenue are a reminder that these are tips. When completed, the rubbish tips were covered with the original topsoil and it was expected that they would be colonised by acid grassland species and come to resemble the rest of the Common. To some extent this has happened but there have been other influences. On the Cedars Avenue tips, for example, grass fires and rabbits have kept the vegetation short for years. Rabbits have bounced back after myxomatosis and are present in vast numbers. Only rabbit resistant plants stand any chance today.



Path rising up the edge of Cedars Avenue tip, now completely screened by bushes.



Hawthorns on Cedars Avenue tip, undercut by rabbits.



The view from Mill Hill towards Pollards Hill.

Mill Hill

Mill Hill presented a very difficult environment. The hill top, being originally subsoil clay, was sticky or even waterlogged in the winter and rock hard and cracked in the summer. Over the years the soil has weathered and it now supports grassland with seed bearing plants to provide winter food for birds. The banks were faced with sewage sludge, which is still too rich for tree colonisation and these are covered in stinging nettles. The Preservation Society planted oak saplings in a number of places in the 1980s which are slowly having an impact but hawthorns and birches planted by the Conservators have become established on other banks which now begin to look more like a natural part of the Common.

The landscaped hills

These hills are still relatively young and at the moment they are maintained as meadows. They have added a totally new dimension to the Croydon end of the Common. Previously it had been flat and featureless and for 30 years it was little more than a series of football pitches. The hills now provide elevated walks with panoramic views which give pleasure to many. Generous plantings of poplars hide unwelcome views.



Birch trees planted on the north bank of Mill Hill.



View from Watney's Road looking towards the first hills, on the Croydon boundary.

The way forward

In 1984, the new warden, Martin Boyle, faced a formidable task. The landscaping programme was finishing but there was a backlog of work to do and an ever increasing battle with litter, fly-tipping and motorcycles. Even managing the remains of the old Common was not easy as nature had other plans for these areas. His success at juggling all these demands has been remarkable.

Help with the accumulation of rubbish

The dog walkers started a clean-up operation as so many of their dogs were being cut by broken glass. They picked up the broken glass and other rubbish daily for months. The Preservation Society began rubbish clearance weekends in 1989 to tackle the accumulated rubbish of years. The first four were big events, attended by volunteers ranging from Brownies to senior citizens and the volume of rubbish collected was truly astounding. Eight skips were filled in 1990 and another five in 1991.



Rubbish clearance. William Morris, Martin Boyle and Janet Morris.

Roadside edges

Mitcham Common is fragmented by roads and there are six miles of edges to keep clear. Litter and fly-tipping are a major problem and it has never been possible to keep these edges clean with the finances available. Mr Haddow finally convinced the local Highways Authority that this was really their problem. All this rubbish was generated by passing traffic and they agreed to take responsibility for the major road verges and ditches.

The Ponds



An evening view of Seven Islands Pond taken recently.

The excellent free fishing attracted anglers from miles around. Many camped overnight, lighting fires and cooking. Vast quantities of ground bait were thrown into the water where it rotted to produce a dense scum of blanket weed on the surface. The banks were thick with litter, and there was so much discarded fishing line, with lead weights and hooks that the pond was a deathtrap for swans and other water birds. Licensed fishing seemed to be the answer but the problems of control in such an isolated site proved a major obstacle. Reluctantly, in 1988, the Conservators removed the big fish, and they have repeated the process when necessary.



One Island Pond, with bullrushes which were planted after excessive fishing ceased.

Serious damage to the Common

'Traveller' invasions 1998-2001

In the 1990s, 'travellers' turned fly-tipping into a very profitable business. As their families occupied a site it was let out to a network of contractors who tipped unopposed for two or three weeks whilst the site owners obtained a court order to move them on. Unbelievable quantities of rubbish were left behind and the costs of disposal were potentially ruinous.

Travellers occupied the upper field behind Mill House in 1998 and Mill Green (near the Goat) followed, but an attempt to occupy the Seven Islands Pond site was foiled. Three years later, the railway tip site was invaded. This was such a highly organised operation that in six days more rubbish was dumped here than in the three weeks at Mill House. But attitudes to these travellers had by now hardened. The police moved them on quickly, using Section 61 of the Criminal Justice Act; no doubt spurred on by the many telephone calls from members of the Preservation Society that blocked their phones!

The estimated cost of removing this illegally tipped rubbish was many tens of thousands of pounds. Martin Boyle and his staff burnt a great deal and buried more but even then the cost was money the Conservators could ill afford. The Common has now been made as secure as possible by creating ditches or earth.

banks on all access points, but even these may not keep out really determined invaders.

Motorbikes

Motorbikes have always been a problem on the Common but they eventually became unbearable on the new hills at the Croydon end of the Common. Broad muddy tracks developed over a wide area. People were no longer safe to walk there and the continual noise was stressful.

Martin Boyle and the police did what they could but police on foot cannot control determined youths on bikes. The Preservation Society responding to public despair, petitioned the police in 2006 to provide their officers with off-road motorbikes. Eventually, in 2009, an off-road unit was set up for use wherever needed in the whole of Merton; with encouraging results so far.



Yellow toadflax is confined to a few places on the Common.

Wildlife survey 1983-1984

In 1983, the Conservators sponsored a Manpower Services team led by Roger Morris, to survey the wildlife of the Common. This brought to light the true riches of our inheritance and the Conservators are fully committed to conserving, and if possible increasing, these habitats. For example, Mitcham Common is an important site for solitary bees and wasps and boasts numerous species that are nationally scarce. Many make underground nests in firm sandy soil in paths, making a neat hole with its accompanying spoil heap.



Mounds of soil excavated by burrowing bees.

Natural woodland development

There has always been gorse on the Common but once grazing stopped other prickly plants appeared. By the 1930s, people were complaining bitterly about the ever increasing number of blackberry patches and by the 1950s, hawthorn bushes were becoming a problem. Small isolated bushes may seem harmless but they grow rapidly into sizeable shrubs.



Dense scrub with gorse and hawthorns.

If they are close enough their branches eventually meet and create dense shade that kills off everything below. In the 1970s, hawthorn copses were commonplace, the crowded bushes getting steadily taller as the years passed. A few copses never got beyond this stage and now, as the old plants die, light reaches the ground again.

In most copses, however, young oak saplings were to be found amongst the bushes. These came from acorns planted by jays, long ago, seeking out the shelter of the hawthorns when they were still small and out in the open. For years the saplings struggled upward against the expanding shrubs but in the last 20 years they have become tall enough to spread their branches above the canopy, shading out and killing the hawthorns.



Dense hawthorn woodland with little light.

The woods today are rapidly emptying as the hawthorns collapse and fall over. Only the oaks will remain. Some are already very fine trees, their long bare trunks a reminder of their early struggle to reach light. Shade-loving trees like holly and yew are now appearing in some woods, whilst others support little more than bracken or straggly brambles. They are all still relatively young and they have yet to develop a stable woodland flora. It will be interesting to see what happens next.

Acid grassland and the heathland rescue



Heather overlooking the 16th tee of the golf course.



Acid grassland at its best, rich with flowers. The large ant hill seen here is also a characteristic feature.



The glowing autumn colour of Purple Moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*) which grows in wetter areas.

The original vegetation of the Common was a type of flower rich grassland that is well adapted to the acid soil. It also supports low-growing shrubs like heather and gorse which are spectacular in flower. Lowland grass heaths of this type are fast disappearing across southern England because they are no longer grazed, and woodland is replacing them. Mitcham Common is recognised as a 'Site of Metropolitan Importance,' by virtue of these threatened habitats, because they are found in few other places in London. Environmental Stewardship grants have been secured for the next 10 years to help maintain Mitcham Common's acid grasslands and heathlands.

Scrub clearance

Grass heaths can be restored by grazing but without fencing and supervision this is not practical. The only realistic solution is scrub clearance, to weed out invasive species. This is both labour-intensive and expensive. Small-scale scrub clearance undertaken by the Preservation Society over many years was helpful but it was a losing battle. Scrub clearance needs to be ruthless and on a large scale. In the late 1990s, Martin Boyle started a major programme of clearance. A large expanse of acid-grassland near Seven Islands Pond has now been opened up and the area is enlarged every year. There has also been a positive programme to extend the area of heather on the Common, at present restricted to a small part of the golf course.

The Common today

Over the last 100 years Mitcham Common has changed almost beyond recognition. Instead of a flat windswept grass heath, almost devoid of trees, it is now well wooded. Extensive natural woodland has been supplemented by generous planting of crack willows, white poplars and hybrid balsam poplars on the boundaries and road edges. In addition, there are hills and valleys, ponds and wetlands, woodlands and open grassland.

Most importantly, some of the acid grassland and heathland survives and is now managed for its intrinsic value. Every section of the Common has its own distinct character providing the walker with variety that is quite exceptional in an area of this size. Mitcham Common has had a chequered history but the final outcome is remarkably pleasing and worthy of a visit.



The path to Cedars Avenue.

Friends of Mitcham Common

The Mitcham Common Preservation Society was originally a pressure group that campaigned against controlled tipping on the Common, but it collapsed in 1978 after it failed to stop the first phase of 'Landscaping'. When plans for the third phase appeared there was nobody to voice the public objections and protest was very slow to become organised. It was quite obvious that a permanent Preservation Society was needed to act as a watchdog and to be there to organise quick and effective action against perceived threats.

The Society reformed in 1984 and worked for the improvement of the Common for the next 20 years. As time passed public attitudes to natural places changed fundamentally and conservation has now entered mainstream thinking. The Society became more co-operative, organising a regular scrub-clearing group and annual litter clearances. It found itself working alongside the Conservators to fend off external threats which included several plans for new roads. In 2004, The Society changed its constitution to reflect its present status and became 'Friends of Mitcham Common'.

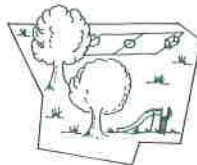


The curved tree is an oak that is now spreading its branches above the hawthorn that sheltered it when it was small.

Friends of London Road Playing Fields are pleased to be sponsoring the production of this booklet on the history of Mitcham Common. Mitcham Common has provided a great open space for the people of Mitcham for generations. Like the London Road Playing Fields the Common was an area under threat. It was saved in 1891 by the establishment of the Mitcham Common Conservators. We hope this booklet will inspire you to enjoy the Common.

If you enjoy your walks on Mitcham Common then why not visit the London Road Playing Fields, behind the Baron Court Flats, to see Mitcham's first Community Park.

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