

The history of the Friends of Mitcham Common

Friends of Mitcham Common

This society was known as the Mitcham Common Preservation Society for over fifty years until 2004 when the present name was adopted.



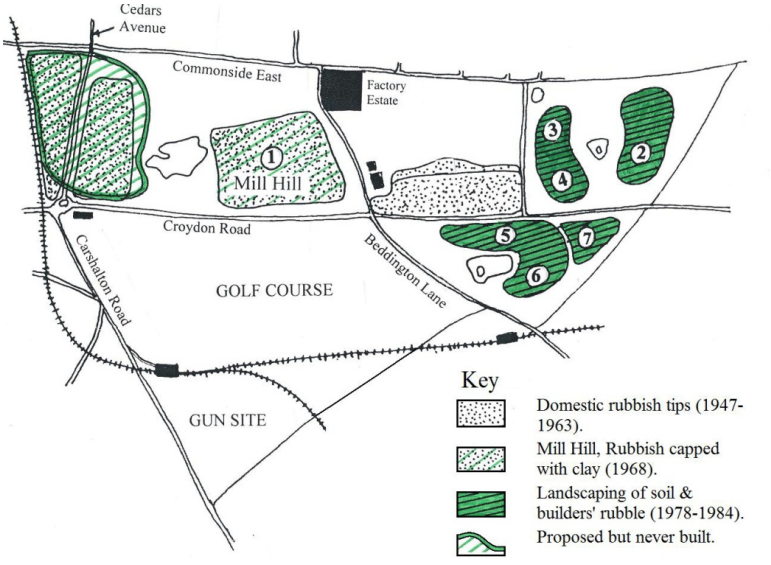
1954. Trying to prevent work starting on Mill Hill.

The Society began as a pressure group shortly after WWII, protesting against the tipping of domestic waste on the common. It was very active in the 1950s, trying to stop the building of Mill Hill even resorting to direct action. The public outcry forced a limit to the size of Mill Hill and deterred further tipping.

The following years were relatively quiet. Their leader, Mr Winbow, died and inevitably the society faded. But in 1973 they were needed again, this time to fight the construction of 'landscaped' hills at the Croydon end of the common. Protests were successful in re-aligning the new hills but failed to stop them. The landscaping continued for ten more years but the society lost momentum and became inactive.

Revival of the Society

In 1984 plans emerged for another and very much larger phase of 'landscaping', stretching from the 7-Islands Pond to the railway and obliterating Cedars Avenue. Local activists protested strongly and successfully against plans and then re-launched the Society to counter any further threats to the common and to help to improve it.



Between1947 and 1984 more than a third of the Common was covered in tipped material.

Practical help

1. Symbolic clearance of the Bidder Memorial



The Society felt that the 'landscaping' contravened the Metropolitan Commons (Mitcham) Supplemental Act 1891, which was intended to maintain the common in its natural state. The Act seemed to have been forgotten and the memorial to J.P. Bidder who saw the Act through Parliament was equally neglected and hidden by trees. The Society re-affirmed the importance of the Act by clearing away shrubs and trees so the memorial was once more visible.

2. Scrub clearance

The common was in a bad way: it was increasingly overgrown with brambles and hawthorns and was littered with rubbish. Volunteers met once a month for many years to help with maintenance. Most work was to save the grasslands in open areas around the 7-Islands Pond, but included footpath clearance, pulling out ragwort and haymaking.

And a good time was had by all!



William Morris: Marion Thurley: Steve Coles: John Thurley and Judy Groome.

Scrub (continued). In the early days, few people appreciated how serious the scrub problem was. As more and more scrub developed into woodland it became obvious that really large-scale work was needed to prevent the whole common from becoming woodland. In Bidder's day scrub was held in check by grazing animals, but these were no longer present.

3. Tree Planting 1981-92



Oaks planted in 1989 on the north bank of Mill Hill.

For a long time the banks of Mill Hill were very unattractive, completely covered in stinging nettles. Tree cover was needed.

In 1989, 180 oaks were planted on the south bank of these hills. The following year, a further 90 were planted on the West bank.

In 1991, 60 assorted trees, many of them silver birch, were sponsored at the Carnival and planted on the north bank. More were sponsored the following year.

4. Sycamore clearance 1984-6

Sycamore trees are not native to Britain. They produce abundant winged seeds that germinate freely and they spread rapidly, crowding out native plants.



In the 1980s the society spent four summers helping to tackle very serious invasions of sycamores in the woods in the north of the common. In 1984 over sixteen thousand seedlings and hundreds of knee-high saplings were weeded from woods on Commonside East. The following year, older saplings were removed from woods behind the Ravensbury Arms, and in 1986 from the Carshalton Road woods.

5. The fishing survey 1988

In the 1980s, a hundred fishermen could arrive at the start of the fishing season and many camped overnight, often making fires and cooking. The amount of litter left behind was unbelievable and some action was needed.



In 1988, the Society organised a fishing survey to provide the Conservators with some facts about numbers, usage and abuse. The results were serious. The Conservators removed the fish and people woke up to the dreadful problem of litter.

6. Litter clearance

Many people started to clear litter on their regular walks, the dog walkers concentrated for months on broken glass which damaged their dogs and which could be found under every bush. Others unravelled yards of fishing line with lead weights that damaged birds. This individual action continues even today and is a major help in controlling litter in all parts of the common.



The Society pressed for bins.

Annual litter clearing weekends 1988-1994

At first, the amount of litter collected was spectacular, starting with 5 skips and rising to 8 large skips in 1990. After this there was reduction as the backlog was cleared.

1990. Donne Place copse was cleared over one weekend. After two great fires to burn the rubbish, two skips of rubbish remained.

1993. Clearance of land in Wingate Crescent when it became part of the common.

Annual litter clearance is still advertised but it no longer has the excitement of a treasure hunt and individual work seems now to be preferred. This does, however, still make a significant contribution

Events

Walks and talks



Janet's monthly midweek walks from 1987-1999 explored all parts of the common.
Melanie's walks both on and around the common started in 2010 and are still on going, although less frequently.
Healthy walks every week.
Occasional walks to look for birds or fungi, etc.
Talks by visiting speakers at practically all AGM meetings.

The Bidder Centenary June 1996

A Green Fair was held to commemorate George Packer Bidder who made it all possible. There was a variety of events, including an exhibition of the history of the common, walks to see the Bidder Memorial and to look for butterflies and birds, and an illustrated talk on birds.

Financial help



1998. A grant was obtained to help pay for the Conservator's first information leaflet.

2006. A contribution was made to help equip a police motorbike team to work on the common after a big campaign asking for police help. Motorcyclists were ruining the new hills.

2009. Help with the purchase of 10 benches, with funding from Groundwork Merton.



2008. Help with de-silting the pond to try to stop it from drying out in the summer.

2012. Help with blackberry clearance to remove enormous stands of a rampant blackberry that was quite out of normal control. Great tracts of the common were entirely covered, smothering other plants.

Publicity



MAGPIE

the newsletter of the
MITCHAM COMMON PRESERVATION SOCIETY
- formed to protect and improve the Common

Editor: Ngaio Creguer
Graphics: Colin Robinson
October 1984
Issue No. 1

The Common: What Next?

The Mitcham Common Conservators are to consider a modified "landscaping" scheme, put up by Merton Council, for the area between Cedars Avenue and the railway, at their next meeting. This is despite the overwhelming rejection by residents of their earlier plans for large-scale tipping and hilling around the area of Seven Islands Pond.

At a public meeting in March, called by the Conservators to test local opinion on their proposals, residents opposed any further tipping, "landscaping" or hilling on the Common, and there were calls for the Conservators to resign. The Conservators subsequently withdrew their planning application.

When the Mitcham Common Preservation Society heard of the latest scheme we wrote to Mr Vincent Talbot, chairman of the Conservators to express our concern. He replied that he was sure the board would honour their responsibilities to the Common and the residents of the contributing boroughs - as they had in the past. But he added: "So far as the vote taken by the public meeting earlier this year is concerned, I think you would agree that reciprocal discussion and a calm atmosphere for logical decisions was not achieved."

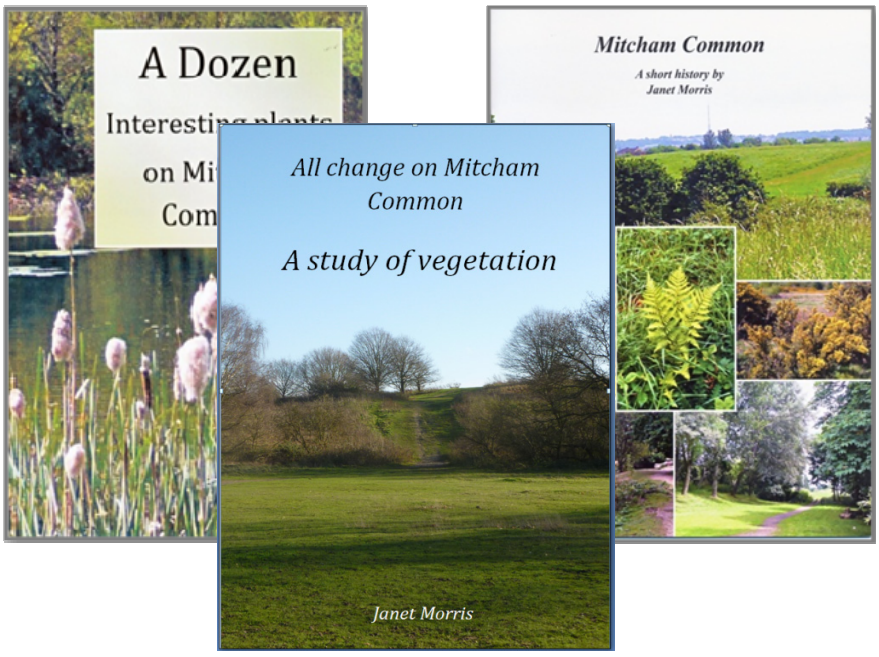
In August the MCPS organised a very well-attended public meeting of its own and one of the decisions made then was to produce a newsletter, to keep members informed of action we were taking to improve and maintain the Common.

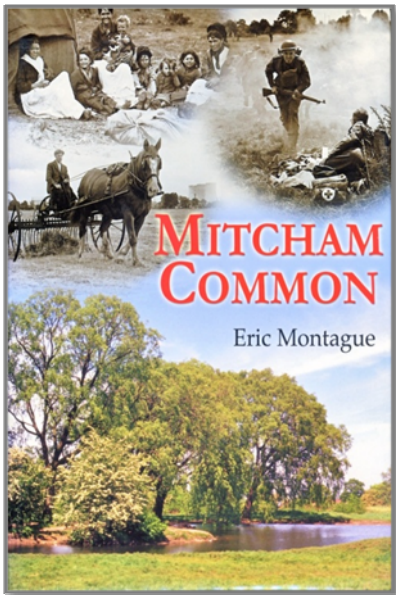
We are following carefully the latest plan by the Conservators, for which they will need planning approval.We have also written to a number of Conservators. Cllr Ron Maddox(Merton) told us he has asked for a full report on the implications of further landscaping along the railway line and Cedars Avenue. Cllr Tony Nicholson (Merton) said he would ensure that any proposals were the subject of full and early public consultation.

VIGILANCE IS NECESSARY Attend the next meeting of the Conservators, on December 5th, in Croydon, if you can.

The Magpie has been produced three times a year ever since the society began in 1984, providing information on current affairs, wildlife, history and coming events. It also alerts members to planning and other threats to the common and surrounding areas. Through the Magpie, members are encouraged to participate in actions such as protest letters and petitions when needed. Many members play their part. The most serious threat was a proposal to build a Southern Relief Road alongside the tramline and Terry Ellis was instrumental in finding an alternative route (which was never built).

Other Publications





Eric Montague's book was a joint publication with the Conservators. The remainder were written by the President, Janet Morris, and were funded by the Conservators, except for the Short History, for which the Society received a grant from the Friends of London Road Playing Fields.



Before 2004
Mitcham Common
Preservation Society

By Janet Morris