

REIGATE HEATH NEWS

Friends of Reigate Heath Newsletter Winter 2005 Issue 1

To join, email FoReigateheath@aol.com or write to: c/o Heath Farm, Reigate RH2 8QP

This is our first newsletter, so welcome to our readers!

It includes information on how the Heath is managed, nature-spotting around the Heath, how you can get involved, plus a special report from CAMEL on why the Heath is drying out.

Why Friends of Reigate Heath?

Most of us would agree that Reigate Heath is a special place to visit. Whether it is for a relaxing walk, horse ride or round of golf, we can escape here to enjoy nature in a landscape of great beauty and cultural significance. In fact, fifty years ago it was deemed so special to be legally designated an important site for wildlife - a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and through the dedicated work of certain individuals, this status has been maintained despite a period of serious neglect and mismanagement. In 2002, Reigate & Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) recognised the importance of the Heath and designated it a Local Nature Reserve – a special place for both wildlife and people.

- But what difference does it make to you or me if efforts are made to maintain habitats supporting plant species such as tussock-sedge, cross-leaved heath, or chamomile. Or if conservation work focuses on enhancing the breeding sites for heathland specialists such as certain invertebrates and reptiles?

Wherever the truth lies for each one of us, it is well-recognised that the more space we make for nature, the more fulfilled are our lives whether or not we appreciate the minutiae of the breeding habits of a small copper butterfly or simply enjoy nature's general ambience.

But it would be naïve of us to believe that we can take what we enjoy for granted. It is this legal 'protection' that has the potential to stop the march of the diggers eastwards

towards Reigate. But what if we unknowingly trample over a rare reptilian breeding site in order to get to a ball, or leave our dog faeces in the middle of some heather thereby unwittingly enriching the soil and destroying the fragile ecosystem? Would you do this in the herbaceous border of a National Trust garden or on the middle of a golfing green?! How then can such laws protect our Heath?

The greatest threat underlying the sustainability of Reigate Heath however is the simple fact that it is drying out. As many of you will know, there is a proposal in the Surrey County Council Minerals Plan to include the neighbouring field of Shagbrook as a potential sand quarry. This would be disastrous for the hydrology of Reigate Heath. They will announce their results in March 2006. Please watch the Flanchford Road notice board for updates. **Read the article from CAMEL on this urgent and complex issue.**

Through widening our understanding and respect for the wildlife on the Heath, we can all do our bit to protect its future. Please show your support for the Heath by joining our mailing list. There is a new Management Plan in the pipeline - results of careful discussion between Reigate Heath Steering Group and English Nature. We hope to provide a means of communication and fundraising to support this. There is a way to make the Heath a richer place for both wildlife and people if we all collaborate in our common goal.....to protect the future of the Heath we all love.

Susan Medcalf, Secretary

THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL!

MANAGEMENT NEWS

Reigate Heath has a rich archaeological heritage and contains a mosaic of biologically significant habitats including remnants of **internationally rare & threatened lowland heathland & alder woodland** (known as *alder carr*). Because, since the 19th century, we have lost about 84% of lowland heathland to secondary woodland or development, it is now rarer than tropical rainforests! Another major threat today is lack of appropriate management to maintain the remaining fragile fragments in a good condition. This makes lowland heathland a *priority habitat* under the **UK Biodiversity Action Plan** and highlights the importance of the Reigate Heath Management Plan.

Ian Wright - Countryside Officer Reigate & Banstead Borough Council

I have now been managing the Heath for eleven years with the help of some dedicated people, most notably the Reigate Area Conservation Volunteers who have both done the work on the ground and continually raised the profile of the Heath as an important site (see below). It is almost entirely due to the time that these people have put in on a completely voluntary basis, that **RBBC can now boast that English Nature has recently assessed the Heath from a declining to a satisfactory condition**, one of the few SSSI's in Surrey to be judged so.

As a local authority, RBBC have a statutory duty to manage Reigate Heath to improve those habitats deemed important enough to designate the site as SSSI.

Over the summer, work has continued to control the amount of **bracken**. Many of you will have noticed that large areas were flattened by a special roller, and this treatment - over a few years - will suppress the bracken and allow specialised heathland plants to colonise where before it was too dark for them. During winter, there will be further restoration of heathland by the **removal of carefully selected trees**, which have either been allowed to grow or been planted on areas that would have been heathland. Once these trees have gone, the natural seed bank in the soil will have the conditions necessary to germinate and in a short time the land will revert to heath.

Finally, we have a very hard working team of people that carry out tasks such as grass cutting and emptying litter and dog bins. ***If you should wish to make any comment or report any litter etc that may need clearing please phone the Council on (01737) 276000.***

Simon Elson - Task Organiser Reigate Area Conservation Volunteers

RACV has been doing conservation work on Reigate Heath for 16 years.

So what does RACV do? It carries out ecological surveys, conducts constructional tasks and restores the heathland area by clearing encroaching trees and scrub, which is rapidly turning the Heath into woodland. Yes, shock horror, conservationists cutting down trees, but why?! We all love trees, but from a nature conservation viewpoint, the Heath is actually *more valuable* as a heathland.

How can you get involved? All carefully organised and agreed well in advance, the Management Plan for the Heath sets out what is to be done over any 5 year period, and it's the vols role to help deliver that. Each year, the work programme for everyone (not just the volunteers) is discussed and agreed by the Heath's Steering Group. The vols then have 'task days' out on the Heath doing the work.

If you'd like to join in any of the tasks, the forthcoming 2006 dates are:

**Sunday 15 January Sunday 5 February
Thursday 2 March Thursday 26 January
Sunday 26 February Sunday 12 March**

All tasks start at **10am**. We meet in the **Flanchford Road car park**. You can stay as long or as short as you like. We can find jobs for everyone from 7 to 70! RACV has its own tool kit; we give **task, tools & safety briefings & training on what to do** - so you don't need to be an expert! The primary requirement is enthusiasm! So why not come and join us? You'll pick up new skills, meet new friends, keep fit, and discover some cracking wildlife. But above all, you'll go home with that warm feeling you've done something worthwhile to help the very thing we all love, the Heath.

Next issue..... how the Golf Club helps in managing the Heath for wildlife.

BIODIVERSITY

You can get involved with task work, surveys and monitoring through the RACV and the Friends.
Ideas and help with fundraising and filling in grant applications are very welcome.

By drawing resources to the Heath, we can assist in more effective management by commissioning, for example, more specialist surveys like the one reported below. Please do encourage local groups and schools to use the Heath for wildlife and history studies too. We hope to arrange guided walks during spring and summer, and plans are afoot to devise a Heath quiz for kids! Contact us if you think you can help.

Reptile Survey

Simon Elson

The eagle-eyed amongst you will have noticed some thoughtless person has been littering the Heath with bits of corrugated tin and roofing asphalt. Actually, they're official and all part of the wildlife monitoring of the Heath. They're part of a reptile survey, which the Surrey Amphibian & Reptile Group (SARG), with the help of RACV, has been doing. The last reptile survey was undertaken in 1997 and, with a new Management Plan in preparation, we need to establish how the reptiles are doing, particularly in relation to heathland restoration work.

The results are just being analysed now, so you'll have to wait until the next newsletter to find out! However, the current survey has covered a wider area of the Heath, and this has already established that we have various reptile species over a wider area of the Heath than hitherto known.

We have **common lizard**, **slow-worm** and **grass snake** on the Heath. There are various claims of people seeing **adders** but none have turned up in the two surveys yet. Of the two remaining native reptile species (yes we only have six species) there are no records at all, even historically, of either smooth snake or sand lizard, both national rarities and heathland specialists. For those of you of a squeamish disposition, don't worry, the reptiles are far more frightened of you!

So why the tins and asphalt? Well, reptiles are cold blooded and they use them to warm themselves up, either by sunning themselves on top or underneath. There is also some evidence to show that snakes prefer the tins,

lizards and slow-worms the asphalt, so we're testing that too. If you'd like to know more about SARG, please contact Julia Wycherley on 01737 643827 (who'll also be interested in any reptile sightings you have particularly adders!), or about RACV, please contact Simon Elson on 01737 242644.

Some notes on the Flora of Reigate Heath

Dr. Derek Hill, ex-Chairman of Surrey Botanical Society

Reigate Heath is the largest area of heathland in East Surrey. In the past, the wildflower cover has been of considerable interest especially on the eastern wetter border of the Heath which supported several unusual wetland species, the most prominent being the spectacular **hybrid southern marsh orchids** and also the small insectivorous plant, the **round-leaved sundew**. Shading this area is a stand of an unusual willow - a variety of **white willow** closely related to **cricket bat willow**. At the base of these trees, **white sedge** was to be found, quite a rarity for Surrey. Sadly about fifteen years ago, severe drainage of the area took place with the loss of most of these species.

For many years, **sickle medick** grew on the verges of Flanchford road near to the car park - records go back at least seventy years. This rarish plant, associated with horse feeds, was possibly a relic of the racecourse! Unfortunately the local authority constructed a drainage ditch through the site and medick has not been seen since.

In spring, just north of the Windmill, two attractive species of field forget-me-nots can be found in the short grass- **early field forget-me-not** & **changing field forget-me-not**. These are scattered among many **alder buckthorn** bushes, a shrub which apart from its pharmaceutical use, provided a particularly special charcoal used in explosives.

**Are you a regular birdwatcher, botanist, entomologist, expert historian on the Heath?
This is your page! Send in your observations and ideas!**

NATURE DIARY

What to see on the Heath this Winter *Simon Elson*

A lot of wildlife shuts down for winter, however there's still plenty to see.

One of the joys of heathland is gorse, and when everything else is still thinking about it, its yellow flowers are out cheering everyone up. Did you know we have two species of it on the Heath? There's **Common Gorse** (*Ulex europaeus*) - bigger and a more bluey green, and then the nationally rare **Dwarf Gorse** (*Ulex minor*). Yes, you guessed it, it's smaller, and also a greener/yellowier green!

Some of the **Common Heather** (we have three species on the Heath - but more of that next summer), is still in flower, but most is setting its seed. Did you know heather seed can remain viable in the soil for a considerably long period of time? That's why the heathland restoration work is being so successful. We just need to create the right conditions for it. There are all kinds of grasses, sedges & rushes on the Heath, but you may be able to find the dead stalks and seed heads of **Heath Rush**.

Out early or late, you may catch **fox**, **roe deer** or even a **badger** unawares, and a mild night may bring out a **bat** or two to feed often to the accompaniment of the hoots and calls of the **Tawny Owl**. [If you can spare 20 mins a week, you could join the BTO Tawny Owl Survey. Contact us for details.]

It is probably the birds at this time of year that are the best to watch out for. With leaves off the trees and vegetation dying down, they're easier to spot. We have all kinds of species on the Heath but some key ones to look out for are **Green Woodpecker** often seen flying up from the grassland areas, and what's that small bird perched on the top of the

gorse bush? We do get **Stonechats**, **Linnets** and **Yellowhammers** on the Heath so it could be one of those, but there's increasingly an outside chance it's a **Dartford Warbler**. They're a heathland specialist, which used to be found on the Heath. If you visit the Holmesdale Natural History Museum, you'll find a whole glass case full of stuffed Dartford Warblers and their nests, collected from Reigate Heath! As the heathland restoration progresses, the right habitat for them is returning and, with the mild winters, we've been having the British population of this species is increasing.

In the woodland areas, look in the tree canopies for flocks of **mixed titmouse species**, and also our two Scandinavian thrushes which visit us each winter, the **Fieldfare** & **Redwing**. If you're really lucky, you'll find flocks of **Crossbills**, bright reds & greens, feeding on the pine cones in the tree tops. Their bills are crossed over (hence the name), and they put their heads sideways to the cone, push in their beaks and then turn their head. The crossed bill forces open the plates of the cone as they do this, and the winged seed inside falls into their mouths!

We've **Kestrels** & **Sparrowhawks**, but keep your eyes skinned because we also now have **Peregrine Falcon** and **Buzzard** in the area.

In the next Newsletter, we'll meet some of the harbingers of spring.

For ideas on tracking the patterns of nature with your kids and monitoring the effects of climate change, log on to www.naturedetectives.org.uk or contact the Woodland Trust.

Don't forget to send us your observations!

Dog fouling

Please clear up after your dog using the Flanchford Road bins. Community Wardens are now enforcing the relevant legislation. There is a prohibitive cost in providing more bins and, as the Heath is not an urban park, this is not necessarily a suitable option. However this is a serious issue that needs attention and the Friends would welcome constructive comments.

Please note that the **riding of bicycles** and **metal detecting** are both **prohibited** on the Heath.

Windmill news

There is a Christmas Carol Service at 3pm on Sunday 18th December.

Contact admin@stmaryreigate.co.uk for more information.

Who is the Reigate Heath Steering Group? More on them in the next issue.....

***** SPECIAL REPORT FROM C.A.M.E.L. *****

Why is the Heath drying up?

Bert Smith

CAMEL (Campaign Against Mineral Extraction & Landfill)

Many of us are aware that Reigate Heath is continuing to suffer from a chronic drying-out with profound environmental consequences, particularly obvious in the alder carr and marshy meadow areas.

A map showing piezometric* contours in 1955 compared with current water table information clearly shows the water table has dropped by 6 metres. In fact, Environment Agency tubewells near Old Bonny's Pond show a drop of over 1 metre in the last 18 months. The CAMEL team have carried out an extensive investigation into these phenomena and the various abstraction licenses operating in the immediate area. This led us to retain the services of Hydrogeological Services International Ltd. to examine our findings and provide recommendations.

*[*piezometric - pertaining to the measuring of hydrostatic pressure in an aquifer]*

Our major concern is that Surrey County Council are proposing to designate Shagbrook, land immediately west of the Heath next to the quarry workings, as a potential mineral zone. Their report will be out in March 2006 after which we will only have 6 weeks in which to present a case against the proposal. We will fight this designation since the removal of this "buffer zone" would almost certainly exacerbate the water level problems.

We have now formed a liaison with Officers of Reigate & Banstead Borough Council and look forward to continued close co-operation on this front. In the matter we particularly appreciate the introduction to the local authority by Councillor Christopher Whinney.

We are holding another PUBLIC MEETING to which everyone is welcome
Friday 9th December at 7.30pm, Reigate Grammar School.

For more information, please refer to CAMEL website via www.sandactiongroup.com

What the papers say.....

In September this year, an article appeared in the Surrey Advertiser in which quarry company Hanson denied claims that its operations are adding to drought problems in the area and damaging the environment. A study undertaken on behalf of Betchworth & Buckland Society said that the water table at Park Pit is being maintained by pumping at a level two metres below the natural water table involving considerable discharging of water into Shag Brook, most of which is effectively going to waste. Meanwhile drought conditions on Reigate Heath are getting progressively worse and the environment is suffering. It also pointed out the absurdity of the situation that a sprinkler ban has been in force throughout the summer while the company was pumping out significant quantities of water and allowing it effectively to run to waste.

In October, The Post reported that water supplies, [drawn from boreholes near Reigate Heath], are near record lows. Sutton & East Surrey Water, which serves the boroughs of Reigate and Banstead, Tandridge and Mole Valley, said the region faced its third lowest annual rainfall since records began in 1910 and underground water supplies are already at near-critical levels. The water company draws 85% of its supplies from aquifers. Mike Hegarty, operations director for Sutton and East Surrey Water, said, "We have now entered the crucial autumn and winter recharge period which traditionally provides the rainfall that soaks down to the water-gathering aquifers deep underground. Without a major recharge our resources will be sorely stretched as we enter spring and the hot summer months next year". While the water company has experienced similar long-term droughts, it says a population boom in recent decades has led to a massive demand.

FRIENDS OF REIGATE HEATH

Membership

The formation of the Friends of Reigate Heath has been approved by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, English Nature and Reigate Heath Steering Group. Its primary aims are to represent all who visit and have an interest in the Heath, and to assist in communicating news and issues relating to it.

If you have enjoyed reading this newsletter and would like to receive forthcoming information about the Heath, then please send your details by email to FoReigateheath@aol.com, or fill in the slip below and send it to c/o Heath Farm, Reigate Heath, Reigate, Surrey RH2 8QP. Please tell your friends too.

There is no subscription charge at present, but donations are welcome at your own discretion and will be kept specifically for supporting projects relating to the conservation of the Heath. If enough people come forward to help, we can achieve our goal of raising the Friends of Reigate Heath to a charitable status. This will make every ounce of effort even more worthwhile. If you think you can help with this, please let me know!

If you are a local resident, love walking the Heath, or visiting for an inspiring round of golf, then you are no doubt already a friend of the Heath! Please spare a couple of minutes to add your name to our mailing list.

Thank you for your time.

Susan Medcalf
Secretary

Send to FoReigateheath@aol.com or c/o Heath Farm, Reigate Heath, Reigate, Surrey RH2 8QP

Name: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____

I am interested in :

Please tick

- joining our mailing list.....
- making a donation (cheques made payable to 'The Friends of Reigate Heath')
- helping on RACV task days.....
- helping with surveys & monitoring..... please specify any interests/skills.....

Comments:

THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL!