

REIGATE HEATH NEWS

Friends of Reigate Heath Newsletter Spring 2006 Issue 2
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It is with great pleasure that we open our second newsletter with the good news that Reigate Heath has been saved from the potential threat of a neighbouring quarry.

We are indebted to Bert Smith & members of CAMEL, Reigate & Banstead Borough (RBBC) & Surrey County Councils and all of you who have helped in whatever way to achieve this result. Credit also goes to the various government agencies who, with a little nudging, have done their job properly to uphold Government, County & Borough Council policies to preserve sites designated as important for nature from international to county level. Without the invaluable conservation work over the past 16 years by Reigate Area Conservation Volunteers (RACV), RBBC, Golf Club & Steering Group, Reigate Heath would have been lost.

However, like Lewis Carroll's Red Queen, we cannot afford to stand still while the Heath continues to dry out as mining has its impact on the local area. For the sake of its wildlife and long-term future, we can all find ways to help support its conservation whether it is through respectful use & enjoyment of the Heath or supporting us. We are grateful to everyone who has contributed. For the essential hands-on approach, join the vols (RACV) on a task day (see p.2).

Anyone who knows Shag Brook itself, a water-hole well-loved by dogs and children, will have noticed how it rises and falls during day and night. Its source is now solely water pumped from Tapwood via Park Pit into River Mole via Wonham Mill, raising the question of its effect on water-table levels and the future

of the millpond and surrounding ecology when the pits eventually cease working.

The link between Reigate Heath and Wonham goes back to 1826. The St Mary's Vestry minute books tell us that a Michael Bowyer was miller of both Wonham (a water corn mill) and Reigate Heath Mills, the latter passing out of the Bowyer family in 1868 marking the end of active milling on the site.

It is suggested that Reigate Heath Mill was built in 1765 (albeit shown on an earlier map of 1762) on a favoured prominent dry site above the surrounding marshlands with a cultural history going back to prehistoric times. Prior to the building of a mill, it was renowned for hangings – the spurs of the gallows being dug up in 1817 when trees were planted on the Heath!

In an 1885 book of Reigate, Robert Phillips mentions the Heath as a place to find marshland plants in profusion – quite removed from our experience today. Sadly there has been a history of species loss for the Heath & surrounding areas as a result of gradual lowering of the water table with many of these losses occurring over the last 30 years or so. We are interested to receive memories and past records of the Heath. Holmesdale Natural History Club collates records of old photographs and paintings of the Heath so do check your albums!

Susan Medcalf, Secretary

Surrey Mineral Plan by Bert Smith,

Chairman, Campaign Against Mineral Extraction & Landfill (CAMEL) Shagbrook

'Shagbrook PMZ 60', as it was designated, has now been withdrawn from the Surrey Mineral Plan. CAMEL has spent some 18 months of discussion with English Nature and Environment Agency highlighting the disastrous impact that further quarrying eastwards would have on the hydrology of the area and to Reigate Heath SSSI. Both organisations then imposed such severe conditions so as to make mineral extraction unviable; in support, both Reigate & Banstead Borough Council and Sutton & East Surrey Water Company opposed any extension of existing workings. We are indebted to the support they have given us. However, as is usual, there is a sting in the tail. A six-week window is allowed for objections to be lodged against this zone's withdrawal. This runs from the last week in April until 9 June 2006. In the meantime, we are continuing to maintain our liaisons with all the above organisations to ensure the withdrawal remains.

There are many modern day pressures on unusual open spaces like Reigate Heath; they need our active support if they are to survive for future generations. Through the newly-formed Friends of Reigate Heath, we hope to widen appreciation of the Heath and thereby assist efforts to enhance the Heath as a special place for both wildlife and people. We would like to set up a website, exhibit photos and art inspired by the Heath and continue to raise funds towards conservation projects. Can you help us? Ideas and donations welcome.

Next issue will include an article on the tumuli by an English Heritage expert.

MANAGEMENT NEWS

In our last newsletter, we mentioned that Reigate Heath contains a mosaic of biologically significant habitats, including remnants of internationally rare lowland heathland, alder carr & acid grassland. These are priority habitats under the **UK Biodiversity Action Plan** which require careful management. All work on the Heath whether carried out by the Golf Club, RACV or RBBC is in accordance with a Management Plan, the result of thorough consultation between members of the Steering Group & English Nature. **Reigate Heath Management Plan Phase 3: 2006-2010** is now being formally ratified by RBBC. The Steering Group then bring the plan 'on stream' through preparation of annual workplans & other matters related to carrying out practical management work.

How the Golf Club manages the Heath

by Allan Sims, Chairman of Green

Reigate Heath Golf Club has leased areas of the Heath from the Borough Council for over 110 years. Our professional greenkeepers, led by Derek Walder, work mainly on the greens, tees and fairways; but they also do a great deal of conservation work.

The fairways form the largest part of the golf course that is botanically described as acid grassland. This is a rare habitat, which is kept in a stable condition by regular mowing and verti-draining: a technique for soil aeration.

Heather areas are managed to ensure there is diversity in age structure to provide shelter and food for a wide range of heathland species. Its demise on Reigate Heath over the last 80 years is very evident when we look back at old photographs - mainly through lack of heathland management since the war resulting in encroachment and colonisation by tree and shrub species including bracken in areas that were formerly heathland. In the past, such species would have been reduced by grazing and other uses by man.

Our greens-staff have promoted heather growth within areas for which we are responsible, by carefully spraying bracken, physically removing tree saplings & allowing heather rejuvenation from seed which has lain dormant in topsoil for decades. Common Gorse can become dominant if not carefully managed through strategic coppicing. This also maintains a diversity of age structure for the benefit of wildlife and has allowed heather found underneath to flourish again. It is also important on safety grounds to clear lines of sight because golfers and walkers must be able to see each other on the course.

Golfers, walkers & horse riders all enjoy the use of the Heath. With loss of lowland heath near 90% in the last hundred years, it is gratifying to know that by flourishing as a club, we at Reigate Heath Golf Club can help to conserve a beautiful environment. www.reigateheathgolfclub.co.uk

Reigate Area Conservation Volunteers

by Simon Elson

Many of you will have seen the stacks of wood from our winter restoration programme to return the Heath to its historic heathland & acid grassland. Our work has focussed on a 'glade' area near the A25 & the triangle between the Golf Club drive & Flanchford Road. In both these areas we've removed encroaching tree & scrub growth, building on previous years' work. We try to leave it looking as 'natural' as possible; can you see where we've been? In the 'glade' & north of the cricket pavilion, we've cleared around sources of wet flushes to reduce drying out by trees drawing up the water. We had our first recorded lizard in the glade area - direct result of our habitat work! We've also created refuges for reptiles, small mammals & other species. With many of us using the Heath & lots of dogs racing around, they need somewhere to hide. *An impassioned plea to dog owners: please be considerate & clear up after your pets! Most of our volunteers have had unpleasant experiences this winter.*

Our spring/summer work includes monitoring & information gathering - a vital part of getting the management right. Looking for ericaceous mulch for the garden? Bring a rake, compost bag & join us Sunday 11 June. Meet 10am, Flanchford Road car park.

Representation on the Reigate Heath Steering Group includes English Nature, two RBBC Parks & Countryside Officers, Reigate Heath Golf Club, Reigate Area Conservation Volunteers, a volunteer Technical Advisor, Surrey Archaeological Society, Reigate Society, Reigate Riders Group, Reigate Heath Cricket Club, Campaign Against Mineral Extraction & Landfill, Friends of Reigate Heath chaired by the local Ward Councillor.

BIODIVERSITY

From time to time, English Nature commissions various surveys of the wildlife of the Heath. In addition to the reptile survey last year (see later for results), there was one on invertebrates; Roger Hawkins has kindly extracted the following for us.

Some insects of Reigate Heath

by Roger Hawkins

Reigate Heath, being somewhat isolated from other heathlands, does not have the great variety of insect species found on the extensive heaths of west Surrey, but some specialities of the heather are present. One such is the **Beautiful Yellow Underwing**, a rather small day-flying moth. Its caterpillar, green with white streaks, is just as lovely as the adult. The **Clouded Buff**, another very distinctive day-flying moth with heather-feeding larvae, has not been recorded on Reigate Heath in recent times but may well return as the heathland is restored. A hairy brown caterpillar of its family, the Arctiidae, was found among the heather last autumn and may well turn out to be this species, or perhaps a **Tiger** or an **Ermine** moth.

The **Mottled Grasshopper** is a typical species of heathland and is abundant on Reigate Heath. It is small, with slightly clubbed antennae and thorax strongly indented at the sides, and has many colour forms. Its call is highly characteristic, a "sip...sip... sip...", gradually becoming louder and then terminating abruptly.

Those who play golf or just walk on the Heath will be pleased to know that their activities are helping to maintain one of its best wildlife habitats. Beneath their feet, deep under the hard-trodden paths, are literally thousands of young **mining bees** and **solitary wasps**, each secure with its own food supply in a tiny cell far under the ground. The adult insects may be seen in spring and summer, each excavating an individual burrow in the sand. The holes may be surrounded by a mound of earth, resembling a tiny volcano. One such mining bee, **Andrena ferox**, was found on the Heath in 1998. It is a great rarity, this being the only Surrey record, but the exact location of its nest has yet to be discovered.

The mining bees are most evident in spring. Their larvae feed on balls of pollen mixed with nectar provided by their parent. Later in the summer the same nesting habitat of firm ground is dominated by solitary wasps. These are quite harmless to us, having weak stings only used in the most desperate self-defence, but they do prey on other insects. One of them, **Cerceris rybyensis**, common on the Heath, actually feeds its young on mining bees which it drags down into its burrows. Another large solitary wasp, the aptly named **Bee-wolf**, preys upon Honey Bees. This species has colonised southern England quite recently, perhaps because of global warming. Strangely enough, bee-keepers do not seem too worried about its activities, since it catches bees at a time of year when their numbers are already in a natural decline. Another large solitary wasp, **Ammophila sabulosa**, coloured red-and-black and with a long-stalked abdomen, may sometimes be seen struggling along the ground with its prey, a large green caterpillar. There are many kinds of these bees and wasps on the Heath, and around their nests other parasitic species may be seen – jewel-like **ruby-tail wasps**, wasp-like bees of the genus **Nomada**, or grey **satellite-flies**, each looking for a chance to lay their eggs within a burrow and so usurp the next from its rightful owner.

Some insect burrows have been seen on the Heath in the autumn when no bees or wasps were flying. These may belong to the **Minotaur Beetle**, **Typhaeus typhoeus**, that takes rabbit droppings down its burrows to feed its young. Being nocturnal, it has not yet been recorded on Reigate Heath. It is active again in the spring, so a stray individual may well be found above ground during the day. It is a large black beetle, highly distinctive through having three horns on its thorax in the male, or a transverse ridge in the female.

SUNDAY, 18TH JUNE 11-12pm: Friends of Reigate Heath guided walk (suitable for families). Come & see what insects and reptiles you can spot on the Heath with expert help from Roger Hawkins & Simon Elson. Meet at Flanchford Road car park 10 minutes before.

Reptile Survey by Simon Elson

Spring is always a good time to see reptiles. Being cold-blooded, they're relatively slow moving emerging from hibernation, needing to warm up first. Remember all our native reptiles are protected by law, and it is illegal to kill or injure them! They are far more frightened of you! We are particularly interested in **adder** sightings: please report them to Julia Wycherley (01737) 643827 or me 242644.

Last year's survey has been compared to a previous 1997 survey. Officially, we have a good population of **common lizard** and low populations of both **slow-worm** and **grass snake**. No **adders** were recorded, yet their presence is known in adjoining NW fields and gardens. This year, we're doing further adder survey work along the NW boundary of the Heath. They live at a lower population density than the other reptile species.

The survey report drew some important conclusions: there remain isolated areas of suitable reptile habitat where no reptiles have been recorded: such areas need to be linked into the wider heathland matrix. Disturbance by public usage, particularly off-lead dogs, is having an adverse impact on reptile population: reptiles found more commonly in less publicly-used areas rather than the best habitat areas. This impact is greater on snakes than lizards. There is a paucity of refuge sites for reptiles to hide when disturbed. Work has already started on creating refuges for reptiles, piling logs and brash against the rootplates of wind-blown trees.

What to see on the Heath this Spring

by Simon Elson & Roger Hawkins

Yellow is the colour of spring. **Gorse** has kept our spirits up during the dull winter months. Look out for **primroses**, the yellow pollen of **willow & hazel** catkins, and later **Broom** (has anyone seen this on the Heath recently?). Overwintering butterflies have made few appearances this cold spring, but should be on the wing on any warm day now. The bright yellow male of the **Brimstone** is the most likely to be seen, but the pale greenish-white female may well be mistaken for a white butterfly. One of its foodplants, the **Alder Buckthorn**, is a prominent feature of the Heath.

If you are lucky, you may spot a **Green Hairstreak**, a small butterfly that is probably breeding on the gorse bushes. Its green underside is surprisingly well camouflaged against the foliage, but the plain, dark brown upperside is only visible when it flies. If examined carefully, a **Gorse Shieldbug** may be found sunning itself among the gorse flowers. It is bright green and about the size of a finger-nail, and has a characteristic spine on its underside at the base of the abdomen. Later on, it will lay its eggs on the young pods.

Along path edges, look out for delicate spring ephemerals such as the tiny **forget-me-not** species mentioned in our last newsletter, **Upright Chickweed** and **Bird's-foot Clover**. **Bluebells** along the fringes of the Heath belie the wooded age of these boundaries. You might even spot a **Holly Blue** and, you guessed it, you'll find them around holly, one of the two main foodplants of the caterpillar, the other being ivy.

Sitting atop the white blossom of **Hawthorn** scrub, particularly flanking Flanchford Road, you'll perhaps find a **Whitethroat**, home from Africa singing for all he's worth. Another warbler found in the birch tops is the aptly named **Chiffchaff**, together with the near-identical **Willow Warbler**. Many of the birds mentioned in our last newsletter will be nesting in thick impenetrable patches, particularly gorse. Sadly, with increased public use of the Heath today, we get nowhere near the number or range of nesting birds historically found here. Certainly all the ground nesting species have long gone.

There were many **Buzzards** this winter; watch out for the **Hobby**, a heathland specialist, the **Sand Martins** of the adjoining sand workings being a particular quarry of this species!

If you wish to join our free mailing list, help in any way or send comments or a donation (payable to 'Friends of Reigate Heath') please write to: c/o Heath Farm, Reigate, Surrey RH2 8QP or FoReigateheath@aol.com

Name:

Address:

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Comments: