

Annual Report for 2016

2016 was a good year for FoMC after the series of problems that seemed to beset us in 2015. Immediately after the last AGM volunteers, assisted by Council workers, restored the main path through the orchard and it recovered well from the mess caused by trench digging. With all the work that needed doing it encouraged us to get a regular volunteers group established which now meets monthly (during the summer months at least). Planting resumed in the orchard entrance to create a woodland wildflower area, and this is progressing, although it will take a couple more years to see the shrubs growing up and the bulbs established and the pernicious nettles and docks brought under control. Sadly the apple crop was poor, due to a very wet winter, and what we had was again mostly lost to a few selfish pickers, but even so we had a very successful autumn orchard picnic.

It always heartens me to see how many people care passionately about the Common, although often in different ways. The primary purpose of FoMC is to encourage the good management and responsible use of this ancient grassland for everyone to enjoy. FoMC tries to reflect the different views of its members and, if possible, form some kind of consensus. The membership continues to grow and it is good to have two new members elected onto the Committee again this year. Now that Caroline has taken on our Facebook and Twitter links I have high hopes of new interest in the social media! The Committee does most of its discussions via lively emails, but bigger issues are always discussed at more formal meetings, with minutes posted on the website, so that all members (and non-members) can comment. I also send round newsletters from time to time and welcome your comments back. Some people who love the Common choose not to join FoMC, and when I work quietly in the orchard I realise how many choose to walk or cycle to work or the shops across the Common and up the little steps into the orchard. Many sit quietly for a few minutes on the benches (lovingly restored by Dick and Barry) and often comment to me how much they appreciate what we do. We also get strangers turning up at our volunteering sessions, sometimes clearly at stressful moments of their lives.

So what happened on the Common this year? The main event was the completion of the renovation of the paths, including those that have been widened. Any widening of paths on Common land causes contention and requires extensive statutory consultation within the community followed by permission from the Secretary of State. No one likes more concrete on our green spaces, but we sadly had to accept that there has been such an increase in the numbers using the Common on a daily basis that the paths were becoming unfit for purpose. I am pleased that since the completion of the work there have been very few adverse comments, although we would all wish that the (thankfully few) irresponsible fast moving commuter cyclists would learn to slow down when they enter shared common space.

Many people commented how lovely the Common looked last summer. The Council's management plan for maintenance worked well on the whole, and the large public events were organized efficiently, with the minimum of complaints. This follows several years of discussion between Council officials, our Councillors and FoMC and shows how important it is to develop good channels of consultation. In particular it was good to see much safer management for the successful Fireworks and Fair, following the serious accident in 2015. FoMC again had a very busy stall in the Kids section of the Strawberry Fair, introducing children to the Biodiversity of the Common- this year the bat masks were a great success as well as the usual 'bee hotels' and cut out swifts and

butterflies. We will again be running a stall at the Strawberry Fair this year on June 3 and will be emailing round for volunteers to help- it is always an enjoyable occasion and helps us to connect with the wider community. On the more socially responsible level, since many of us walk daily on the Common we can quickly report any drug related issues or rough camping to the appropriate Council authorities.

Increasing the biodiversity of the Common is part of the remit of FoMC and is on-going. Our bees have successfully survived the winter thanks to the watchful eye of Will Beavitt our bee expert, and they are busy pollinating the blossom in the Community orchard. They seem to thrive on the hedging that we have planted. We have just recently planted some hops, which as well as supplying us humans with potentially welcome refreshment are apparently equally welcomed by the bees. Do we have any volunteers to start the FoMC micro brewery?

We have not yet been successful in enticing any swifts to nest in our swift boxes installed under the Elizabeth Way bridge, despite broadcasting lovely swift calls all last summer, but we were warned that it might take a few years. There used to be hundreds on the Common and we will persevere this summer! Equally with the bats. We have been encouraged by the Cambridge Wildlife Trust to undertake a survey of the bats on the Common, and to see whether we can increase their numbers. Last summer there did not seem to be large numbers around, but now that we have finally installed the bat boxes high up in a tree in the Eastern Pound we are hoping to undertake a more systematic survey with our bat detector to try and record which species are present. Please let me or Jo know if you would like to get involved with this.

I have left until last the report on the progress (or otherwise) relating to ongoing legal issues that we wish to resolve. Firstly, parking and driving on common land is illegal, except for essential deliveries and maintenance vehicles. Members of FoMC continue to monitor the illegal parking and driving, particularly around the Fort St George Pub and Midsummer House restaurant. All photos get sent to the relevant Council official. Part of the discussion over the renovation of the paths around the FSG involved a realisation that the provision of some additional, environmentally sensitive, hard standing for the temporary parking of the many delivery vans and larger lorries that arrive on a daily basis would be helpful. (You have no idea how many vans are needed to supply a Michelin starred restaurant!) It was hoped that this would stop the daily parking and driving over the grass, which causes considerable environmental degradation. However, illegal parking in the turning areas often prohibits good practice. A new manager has recently been appointed to the FSG and we are hoping that Council officials can persuade him to be more co-operative than the previous one. (We can but live in hope after so many years of problems.) Other issues include the resolution of the public right of way on the path by the Synagogue linking the orchard to Auckland Road, which awaits a reply from the County Council (although meantime residents and the Synagogue are co-operating in a civilised way in the use of this path) and the status of the Auckland Road allotments.

Finally I would like to flag up two issues that we will all need to be discussing in the near future. Firstly our wonderful avenue of chestnut trees, which many of you will know are being infected by the chestnut tree leaf-mining moth which is spreading widely across the UK. There is no known treatment and we are in discussion with Kenny McGregor, the Council Tree Officer, as to what can be done. Kenny is currently monitoring the trees and felling those that are too badly affected and becoming dangerous. He is in close consultation with Kew Gardens and other parks and the Council may have to consider eventually replanting the avenue with resistant trees. He has promised widespread consultation before any decision is made.

Secondly, there has been an understanding over the last two years that the number of big events on the common should not be increased. Indeed, last summer was so pleasant because some of the charity events had been moved to other open spaces, allowing local residents and the cattle more time on a Sunday simply to enjoy the Common without loudspeakers, cars, tents and traffic. However, this year the Council has brought in a consultant to examine whether other paying events could be accommodated on our open spaces. Local Councils have recently suffered savage financial cuts imposed by Central Government and I can see why they may be tempted into making more money out of our open spaces. However, this could have serious implications for the future well-being of our iconic Common and its famous cattle. It should be remembered that there is very clear evidence that easy access to green open spaces in busy inner cities helps with mental health issues, particularly amongst the more disadvantaged in our community, and a little money spent on enhancing our Commons could actually save the Council money by reducing the call on our overstretched mental health services. The FoMC committee will be monitoring the situation closely.

All that remains is for me to give a big thank you to all those who have helped FoMC over the year. As always, our Councillors and Council officials have been supportive, despite continued reorganization and cost cutting and shuffling of people in the relevant posts. The financial support from the S106 fund for basic costs is gratefully received. Just recently I would personally like to thank the Cambridge Building Society for agreeing to divert one of the downpipes from their main building next to the orchard to supply water to a water butt for much needing watering of our new plants. This will save me a lot of carrying on my still quite fragile legs. Our butt comes from the Cambridge Water Company. Also a particular thank you to those FoMC members with established gardens who have been supplying extra plants and bulbs to plant at the entrance and, as always, to our stalwart orchard workers.

Susan Stobbs
Chair FoMC
April 23 2017