

Annual Report for 2017

After a dreadfully dreary winter and early spring it is good to report that the cows are back and looking very happy on the Common, despite the mud, rain and fog. I am also delighted to say that the Newmarket Road entrance to the orchard is finally looking attractive and welcoming, thanks to a lot of hard work by our loyal volunteers and some very welcome support from the Council in redoing the muddy path and installing some protective railings.

During the summer of 2017 we had many comments from members of the public about how good the Common was looking and it remained so for much of the winter. It was thus sad to see it in probably the worst state it has been in the last 10 years after the recent Half Marathon and Circus events. This provoked a lively and helpful debate on social media as to what the Common is for. FoMC has never opposed the use of the Common for charity runs and bike rides, but we have asked for consideration as to the timing of these events, to avoid using very heavy lorries on the grass during the winter season.

The ensuing discussion made me realise that many people in Cambridge are unclear as to why FoMC was established in 2006 - and I quote here for illustration from a recent email:

"Your opinions are self entitled and elitist and ignore the enjoyment and endeavour of the many not the very few who condemn this event. They also fail to understand the grassland ecology of our (not just your!) Common. Please do not reply!"

I thus think it would be helpful, particularly to our many new members and other non-members who are attending, if I take this opportunity to explain some history.

FoMC was set up in 2006 by a group of residents who were so concerned about the state of neglect of this iconic, historic grassland. The grass had deteriorated significantly, with little biodiversity, partly because the cows had never returned following the Foot and Mouth epidemic, and there were large areas of rank weeds. Many trees were in a bad condition or were missing. The paths were in a sorry state, largely because the City and County Councils could not agree as to who should maintain them. Illegal parking by the Fort St George was a daily event. Big Events were badly organized, with many complaints of drunkenness and drug abuse, and the frequent use of front gardens as toilets (particularly at large charity events). Very little effective restoration took place after the big events. We need to remember that the population of Cambridge has doubled over the last 50 years, but the amount of open space within the city has not changed - hence the ever increasing footfall.

As the 2006 Constitution states: "The primary purpose of FoMC is to elicit support and to make representations to the appropriate authorities in order to encourage the good management of Midsummer Common." (A full copy of the Constitution can be found on our website.) So how was the management of the Common in 2017?

The renovation of the footpaths was completed this year, following extensive local consultation and the final agreement of the Secretary of State (who is required to agree any widening of paths on common land). FoMC had warned the Council that the widening of paths was a very contentious local issue and that was important to consult very widely. This they did, and the resultant scheme has been broadly welcomed by all parties, including the compromise low level stud lighting. The extension of the cobbled area around the Fort St George Pub and Midsummer House, suggested by FoMC to allow for easier parking for delivery vans, has not, sadly, lead to better control of the parking in that area. We still send regular photos of illegal parking to the email group 'Gate', as requested by Council officials to provide evidence for prosecution, but progress is very slow, even after all these years. A recent report to Gate, dated Sunday morning, recorded 11 vehicles illegally parked outside the pub and 2 more inside the pub grounds, and in addition I large HGV trying to reverse.

FoMC has worked for some years with the Council and Police to establish proper management plans for the Big Events, and this year all seemed to work smoothly and enjoyably, with few complaints. The FoMC stall in the Kids Section of the Strawberry Fair was as busy as ever, with parents welcoming the opportunity to sit down and relax while their kids were enthusiastically making bat masks and bee hotels. After further extensive consultation the City Council has now agreed a new management plan for events on all our open spaces, which we broadly agree with, with upper limits being placed on the number of large commercial and charity events on each area. There is also a clear commitment to provide good remedial work after each event, paid for by the event organisers. Certainly the work carried out after the Half Marathon this year seemed more rapid and professional than in previous years - although much still needs to be done to deal with the very deep ruts, or we will have more email complaints of sprained ankles in the summer.

The maintenance schedule of the grass cutting by the Open Spaces team has generally been good this year and when the patches of uncut nettles in the autumn did get rather too large for comfort the team responded quickly to FoMC's request for another mowing before Bonfire Night. There are some dead trees that are in need of replacement, and Kenny McGregor, the most helpful Council tree manager, tells us that he will be reviewing the planting on Midsummer Common in 2018. This will involve consulting about the future of our magnificent chestnut tree avenue. Many will know that these have been affected by the nationally widespread Horse Chestnut Leaf Minor infestation. There is no known treatment and Kenny is currently felling those trees that are severely and dangerously affected, while consulting widely as to future plans for replanting, if it proves necessary.

The Community Orchard became a very unpleasant place to be for many months in the summer, when drug dealers and users made it a regular base. This reminded us of the situation before the Council authorized FoMC to establish the orchard in 2010 on an unkempt small area of the Common, used as a temporary cattle pound, which was often full of drug debris in amongst the nettles. The orchard is now a beautiful quiet space, frequently used by those in need of a solitary place to sit, including homeless people, which is not a problem. (Although we do politely discourage rough sleeping, and inform the Council enforcers if people persist in staying.) However, overt drug use in broad daylight is different, and although the Council and police were informed, not much seemed to happen and the problem persisted to such an extent that during one volunteering session we found 17 used needles in the orchard. At this stage we used the press to alert the city as to what was happening. This resulted in a crowded residents meeting with the police and Council officials which has led to much better co-operation: residents now know exactly who to contact, and although there continue to be isolated incidents these are now dealt with quickly and quietly and the orchard has reverted to being a welcoming place to enjoy.

As always, the volunteers have continued to work hard under the guidance of our orchard manager, with the welcome assistance of an energetic group from Astra Zeneca on one of their community away days. The new hops have done well and we have just planted some more. We had a very good crop of fruit which was enjoyed by the community, although the cherries had to be eaten very quickly to stop the birds taking them all! We had a fine day for the traditional orchard picnic during which Will, our expert bee keeper, showed us how to extract the honey for our own use, and we pressed plenty of apples for their juice. (This was the first year in which we were able to eat our own honey.) We celebrated Midsummer with the local historian Jon Harris, who, on a very hot evening took us on a fascinating walking tour of the older parts of the neighbourhood, ending in splendid fashion at the pop-up pub at the Museum of Technology. We hope to plan a similar Midsummer walkabout in 2018, but this time with local swift and bat experts to check out the nesting sites around the area.

I end my report by passing on the gratitude of all members to Barry Higgs, who, with his wife, will be leaving Cambridge quite soon to be nearer his family. Barry was a founder member of FoMC, former Secretary and Chairman, and a tireless worker in the Community Orchard. He will be much missed by us all.

Susan Stobbs
Chair FoMC
April 2018