No longer fit for purpose?

The Thames Barrier has been protecting London for more than 30 years. But how long will it remain fit for purpose, as sea levels rise?

The barrier has played a vital role in protecting the capital. A twice-daily, the freshwater Thames meets the incoming tide from the North Sea, making sea levels rise and then fall by seven metres in the Thames estuary. The tide has had to be restrained twice at the barrier – each weighing around 3,300 tonnes – can be raised at mid-tide, as necessary. The barrier can then be lowered again when the tide goes out.

The main threat to London is the storm surges that often reach Blackheath on March 20th, and was attended by a number of local residents, with much of the Underground. In December last year, following the biggest North Sea storm surge for 60 years, the Environment Agency published a map showing the probable effect on central London if no barrier had been in place.

More than a million people, and property worth more than £200m, would have been affected by flooding, including the Houses of Parliament, the Canary Wharf business district, and much of the Underground.

The ten giant steel gates of the barrier – the largest movable flood barrier in the world – are moved every month for test and maintenance purposes. Once a year it is tested at a high tide, usually in September or October. Our readers may be interested in visiting it close or even crossing it completely closed. It is also a natural habitat for birds and wildlife.

Marathon cancelled by water shortage

The recent closure of the London Marathon had been cancelled for health and safety reasons because of a water shortage that had caused noise in the river. The next race is scheduled for 10 April, but we hope to see that the barrier is working as planned.

Not a member of the Westcombe Society?

If so, isn’t it time you joined, and got involved? It’s a great way to meet people from the local community – especially if you are a newcomer. Members can take part in members-only events, and other events at a reduced rate, and can take advantage of the Buy Low scheme (details on page 8). Membership application forms can be found on page two.

Our shrinking brains

Those who took part in the Westminster’s latest quiz night may be surprised by hearing that, according to Professor Hood, the human brain appears to have shrunk by 20% over the last 50 years, and that the brain’s size is determined by genetics and early life experiences. The lecture is given by Professor Hood, and will take place at 7.30 pm in St George’s, Glenluce Road.

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WESTCOMBE NEWS

COMMUNITY NEWS

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ALL EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Neville Grant, The Editor
www@westcombesociety.org
Tel: 020 8858 0489

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wnews@westcombesociety.org
Deadline for June 2014: 16th May

Newspaper

Environment: Editor: Maggie Graetzel

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Tel: 020 8853 1312

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To access back-numbers (in colour) go to: www.westcombesociety.org/westcombe-news/

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Letters to the editor

Any views expressed are those of the writers only, and are not necessarily those of the WSN or the Westcombe Society.

Letters to the editor

From: Emily Norton, Treasurer
Westcombe Park

Many thanks to everyone who gave us a hand with the quiz. The money raised goes to charity.

From: Peter Dunmore, Treasurer
Westcombe Park

I wholeheartedly agree with G. Bailey’s letter concerning Trevor Allman’s rant against Westcombe residents. The Queen is an elderly lady who has dedicated her whole life to the service of her country, and I found Mr Allman’s comments distasteful. He is entitled to his views, but they would be better kept to himself.

Egged on . . .

We lost count of the number of eager egg-hunters who tuned up for the annual Easter Egg Hunt in Mycenae Gardens on April 19th – and the prizes for the best Easter Bonnet and Basket were hotly contested by everyone. Everyone seemed to have a jolly good time! Many thanks to Emily, Jody and Laura, who have brought a breath of fresh spring air to the event, and well done, the winners!

From: Tom and Emma Kay

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Greetings from our wonderful yearbook ‘Food and fellow spirits’ that has dedicated her whole life to the service of her country.
It's almost a military campaign: you have to get organised. Baby lays out all her kit in preparation for running tomorrow morning. T-shirt, P&O Sports Tag timing device, red kitbag, map, IPICO Sports Tag timing, jeans, you name it... Checking in at the start.

The numbers say it all: 36,000 runners, 10,000 volunteers, 650,000 spectators – and 15 million pounds for charity. Yes, the London Marathon was here again, and you could sense the feel-good factor was as warm as the sunny Spring day that we all enjoyed on April 13th.

A number of local residents helped out, as stewards, as water distributors... They even took part as hosts, as the scheme got under way whereby competitors from far away – Durham, Devon, Dundee – gave a donation to a charity (Greenwich Cystic Fibrosis) – and in exchange, local residents gave them Bed and Breakfast.

Sacha Bright, who told the BYN about the B&B scheme in our March issue (page 4 Why not host the Marathon?) was very pleased with the take-up.

Sacha (who is the new secretary of the Blackheath Society) said that the charity was trying harder than ever to find a cure for this dreadful disease, and the B&B host scheme was win-win all round.

“I hope we can get even more people to take part next year!” she said.

For example, Betsy, from Nailsea, near Bristol, exclaimed: “Without a friendly local biffet, just getting to the Marathon in time would be a marathon in itself!”

Sally, one of the hosts, said: “It was so interesting to have a competitor as a guest, and to help to psyche them up for the great event!”

All were impressed – but not wholly surprised – that Kenya and Ethiopia dominated the top table, but it was pleasing to see other nations (including two from the Ukraine, who in these troubled times got a lot of support from the crowd) represented as well.

But this event is not simply about winning: it’s about taking part, creating that famous feel-good factor – and raising money for charity!

For the full story and more pictures, visit www.lifeanddeaf.co.uk, and watch footage of the tour on the website. Westcombe News May 2014

COMMUNITY CUPPAS

The Hospice are inviting us to tea – and inviting us to invite others to tea to raise funds for the hospice. They are asking us to put the kettle on to support the hospice and to host a great big community cuppa between 12th and 18th May.

By hosting a tea party at home, or a coffee morning with colleagues at the office, or by running a local community event, you will be helping the Hospice to provide high quality care for local people at a time when they need it most. GBCH are providing a free Community Cuppa Supporter Pack. To obtain a pack, call 020 8319 9230 or email info@gbch.co.uk

FOSTERCARE FORTNIGHT

800 new foster families are needed across the UK in 2014 alone. Foster Care Footnight*, the UK’s biggest foster care awareness and recruitment campaign is taking place between Monday 12th – Sunday 25th May. The campaign will help to find homes for some of the UK’s most vulnerable children.

The Council holds regular meetings at The Woolwich Centre, Wellington Street, Woolwich SE18 6HQ where you can find out more.

The dates of the next meetings are:

- Sat. 26th May 2014 – 10.00 am to 12 noon
- Tues. 24th June 2014 – 7.00 pm to 9.00 pm
- Sat. 26th July 2014 – 10.00 am to 12 noon

*Fostercare Footnight is taking place across the UK in 2014 alone. Foster Care Partnership, the UK’s biggest foster care awareness and recruitment campaign is taking place between Monday 12th – Sunday 25th May. The campaign will help to find homes for some of the UK’s most vulnerable children.

The association is a team of volunteers who work mainly in their own time. Jane Thomas and Katie Ford are specialist speech and language therapists. Between them they have worked for 25 years with deaf children & young people, mostly in Greenwich. Local resident Helena Ballard is an experienced teacher of the deaf who has worked in Greenwich for 15 years.

The aim of the association is to use poetry and the arts to help deaf children explore their identities and develop communication skills and emotional literacy; our overall aim is to improve the mental health of future generations of deaf people.

The Association won the award for their innovative campaign to raise awareness by driving a poetry-wrapped VW-camper van across the UK teaching people how to sign ‘Good Morning’ as a gesture of inclusion. (Find out how by visiting the website www.blinddeaf.co.uk, and watch footage of the tour on the webcast.)

The van stopped at schools each morning and deaf young poets delivered an assembly, performed signed poetry and discussed their feelings and experiences.

As a result of the campaign, schools pledged to add deaf young people’s poetry to the curriculum, to set up poetry corners for self-expression, and to use poetry alongside behaviour management and counselling.

In the afternoons, the camper van went to Tesco car parks to reach a diverse cross-section of British communities. Deaf-awareness information was distributed and some 20,000 shoppers were taught how to sign Good Morning.

The awards – the SLCN (Speech, Language and Communication Needs) Innovation Award at the 2013/14 Shine a Light Awards – took place in March in London and were hosted by Anne Diamond. The awards are run by Pearson Assessment and The Communication Trust to honour those who have excelled in their support of young people’s communication.

LOCAL NEWS

T he Life and Death Association, based in Humber Road, has won a prestigious award for their campaigning work to develop deaf children and young people’s ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings about being deaf.

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Re-inventing oneself

GEORGH GARVEY described his successful career change a few days before he died on March 6th.

For years I was the crime correspondent of the London Evening Standard. I covered the rise and fall of the Krays and Richardson gangs; the race riots in London, and the IRA attacks in the capital. All heavy stuff indeed, but after 30 years or more it was becoming rather depressing with the constant calls to Scotland Yard to check on the progress of murder inquiries and crime in the capital.

Eventually I decided to call it a day, but I wasn’t ready for retirement. So what instead? Well, they often say new opportunities are staring you in the face and here I was aided by my wife Diane. She knew of my love of travel, history, trains, food and meeting people. So she realised there was a new opening that was obvious — I re-invented myself as a tour guide.

First I studied as a Greenwich tour guide and qualified to take people on paid tours around our lovely town. I then wrote to a company called Great Rail Journeys, which specialised in organised trips by rail around Europe. This wasn’t for the anorak steam train brigade; people who couldn’t fly for health reasons or simply because they wanted to see the scenery.

I contacted the firm in York and they told me that, with the opening of 50 LNER trains for continental trains, they were setting up a subsidiary: a company called Treyon Holidays.

After a training course in York I set to. The job involved taking groups of up to 40 people, and escorting them on some fabulous journeys.

We’d meet at St. Pancras and travel on to either Paris or Brussels where we’d change trains. I saw so many marvellous places, like Lake Garda in Italy, and the Swiss Alps, on amazing trains like the Glacier Express, which runs the length of Switzerland and is billed as the slowest express in the world! It takes eight hours on its 180 mile journey and with glass topped roofs to the carriages you can enjoy the splendid panoramic view.

There were spectacular excursions from Lucerne, which involved taking a wonderful paddle steamer across a lake and then climbing up to the steepest cog railway which climbs at an incredible gradient of up to one in two up the side of Mount Pilatus.

Remarkably, there’s a hotel at the top which was built before the railway, so, after a bowl of warming soup you can climb by cable car to the other side of the mountain and catch a bus back to the centre of the town.

There were the big cities like Vienna, Berlin, and, of course, Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, with its hearty mid-European food, huge castle, ancient cathedral and fascinating Jewish quarter.

Vienna was a not-unexpected eye opener. Despite being badly damaged during the Second World War it has been rebuilt to its former pre-war glory with its exotic Baroque buildings.

Berlin proved dramatic. One is always mindful of the war that ended Europe but Berlin bulges with new buildings. There’s the rebuilt Reichstag; the amazing main railway station has trains running straight through the building.

Geoff’s led tour groups to many parts of Europe mainly by train. This photo shows him speeding through the Swiss mountains.

Geoff’s tours were organised by Treyon Holidays, based in York, “Great Rail Journeys”.

PHOTO: Courtesy of Treyon Holidays

Making a difference in Musoma

On May 10th, 5pm – 6pm the small independent charity ‘Go Make A Difference’ in Tanzania will be hosting a fundraising fete to raise awareness and funds for the charity.

The family fun day will be at St John’s Church, Blackheath, SE3 7TH. There will be music, a barbeque, market stalls, lots of games for the children (and adults) plus a short presentation from the founder of the charity, Graham McClure. All are welcome! Go MAD in Tanzania ‘s mission is to provide healthcare to the rural areas of Tanzania. Go MAD in Tanzania has worked in the region for over 20 years with health projects in Zanzibar, Tanzania, and Tanzania.

Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa, provides a fantastic backdrop for the McClure family. It all began in 1994 when St John’s Blackheath helped finance a team to climb Kilimanjaro.

Go MAD in Tanzania is a local charity with offices in the heart of London, founded by the McClure family. It all began in 1994 when St John’s Blackheath helped finance a team to climb Kilimanjaro.

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John’s Blackheath helped finance, design and build a Children’s Home for the Anglican Diocese of Mara, in the town of Musoma. After the cathedral was opened Graham

drives to help the people of Mara and so began to invite teams of volunteers out to help with various community projects, and eventually ‘Go MAD in Tanzania’ was born.

The charity has been partnered with Tearfund Transform for five years. In the last twelve months over 100 volunteers have travelled to Tanzania with Go MAD and Tearfund.

Go MAD work in remote rural villages near Musoma in an area stretching from Lake Victoria to the Serengeti. They help local farmers, people living with HIV and AIDS, orphans, parents and their congregations.

Common problems include little access to a good education, clean water, inadequate sanitation and providing affordable health care.

Visit gomadinfairerence.co.uk

From the archives

Early issues of the Westcombe News are full of inventive against the noise of traffic that came with the increased ownership of the parish. Nor were buses seen as an acceptable solution; Mr Clifford Graham of Go MAD in Tanzania, in the September 1977 issue of the WNY stating: “We object to any proposal to introduce a full regular bus service going the whole length of Westcombe Park Road: we feel that this would be one of the worst things that could happen to our parish.”

Mrs A E Graham even got up a petition against the use of buses: she said that no one in her family had a car, and they did not live near a bus route, but they wanted to extend “peace and tranquility” to more of the roads in Westcombe Park, “to recover the former Woodlands atmosphere.”

Transport problems, they thought could be overcome by the Westcombe Society’s “good neighbour scheme” and family support.

Such statements produced an ironic riposte from Ben Baker of Combe Avenue the following month. In a letter headed “Don’t Panic, Chaps” he adopted the tone of Clive Dunn (Cpl Jones in Dad’s Army), mixed in with a bit of Private Eye’s Dave Spark, when he wrote to the WNY: “It’s no good for the sanity residents of Westcombe Park Road writing to the magazine & describing this traffic problem as ‘ghastly’, ‘appalling’ etc, nor is it any good saying rolled up rollicking The Daily Telegraph at noisy juggernauts …

“Instead what we all must do is sit out this our區 traffic. We must adopt the old wartime attitude. We must remain Cool, and Calm. Collect and Above all, we must, on any account, P A N I C .

“We can soothe our shattered nerves by playing Scrabble, our morale can be saved by listening to Vera Lynn singing. Anything to stop this menace beating us. We must not lose. Finally we can only hope and pray that the deafening roar and the choking smogs that have plagued us for the past few months will go away.

“Until then, we can only look forward to the day when the sound of tinkling tea-cups, and the gentle click of croquet balls can once again bearly be heard at the stately homes and pleasant residence of Westcombe Park Road.”

The Editor of the Westcombe News, John Petty, encouraged readers’ letters on the subject, and the problem ran and ran in the columns of the WNY. There was even a suggestion to erect a No Entry sign at the Western end of Westcombe Park Road.

The residents of Humber Road and Vanbrugh Park Road would certainly have agreed.

“Making a difference in Musoma”

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Westcombe News May 2014

4
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Adding a touch of Rock to your life by two Blackheath Rock Choir members

Rock Choir came to the Blackheath area four years ago and gave anyone who loves singing the opportunity to learn great harmonies in a weekly sessions. Those of us who went along to the evening talent session earlier this year at The John Roan School quickly realised that choir leader, Michael Fricker could magic beautiful sounds out of totally untrained south east Londoners.

It’s better than a work out at the gym or a session with a therapist. Members arrive weighed down with the day’s stresses and leave uplifted. Rock Choir featured on ITV’s ‘The Choir that Rocks’ and showed, over three weeks, the tremendous impact singing together can have on our sense of wellbeing: a recent study found preliminary evidence that regular singing exercises may benefit people who smoke.

Rock Choir has become a huge national success story over the nine years it’s been going, but essentially its heart lies in local communities. The weekly singing mightn’t sound good for, but there are also opportunities to perform at community events. New members are always welcome – we’d love to meet you.

From Westcombe Park to Kathmandu

Benjamin Mountain

Ben (14) is kneeling, second from the right, in this photo at a function at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, where the Deputy Chief of Mission for Nepal [left] wished them good luck. "The family courts system is facing challenges. The legal aid system is facing challenges. No wonder then that people were lining the medullary rays – the lines one sees in objects made of oak. Sweet chestnut does not have them. So yes, it is indeed an oak – or rather, it was – it died probably some time around 1830–1840. It bravely stood up to attend the Friends of Greenwich Housing Rights 36 Wellington Place, London SE10 8BB. Tel: 020 8853 3304 Fax: 0208 858 1784. www.greenwichhousingservices.org

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The legal aid crisis

Chris Minnoch

In April 2013 the government introduced a range of swingeing changes to the legal aid system. Whole areas of law were removed from the system and others restricted to just a few of the most precarious cases. Some areas of law became subject to conditions that create additional barriers for those needing advice. For example, access to family law experts is now restricted to clients able to prove that they have recently suffered domestic abuse.

The changes coincided with significant reforms of the welfare system, generating an upsurge in demand for legal aid at a time when advice charities and solicitors firms were struggling to adapt. Other local and central government funding streams have been withdrawn or reduced, further exacerbating the problem.

So how is this affecting local residents? The changes severely restrict the ability of local residents to get advice on critical issues such as housing, homelessness, welfare benefits, debt, immigration, education and employment problems.

While the local Council has maintained financial support for a range of local advice charities, these charities have been forced to cut staff and reduce services in response to the legal aid changes.

What does this mean?

On a day-to-day basis this means that
* There is often no one to advise residents to turn to for help challenging an incorrect medical assessments by the DWP.
* Employers who are unfairly dismissed or bullied at work can only get legal aid if they can show discrimination.
* There’s often no one to advocate for a student excluded from school and for a family struggling to cope with mounting debt and debt
* A wise wanting to divorce an abusive husband will struggle to get legal advice unless her doctor or another professional can provide evidence of the abuse. Where does this leave the thousands of victims too afraid to speak to their families or friends about their situation?

The recent closure of Greenwich Community Law Centres provides a stark example of the impact of the funding reductions. Law centres in Bexley and Bromley have also closed their doors in recent months and many more have closed across the country.

The law centres supported many thousands of residents each year and their advisers had a great deal of expertise which is now lost to local areas. These law centres fought discrimination and injustice and contributed to the local economy by lifting their clients out of extreme poverty or by helping them back to work.

Demand: sky-rocketing

Demand for advice has sky-rocketed for those agencies able to keep their doors open. The number of clients approaching Greenwich Housing Rights increased by 40% in 2013 compared with 2012. Many of the residents facing eviction are behind in rent or mortgage, but this is almost always due to a range of related legal or social problems. Without the advice services to help with the underlying problems, more people will face eviction and homelessness.

Big Lottery funding

Four local advice charities have obtained Big Lottery funding for new projects to respond to new challenges. Similar projects are in place in Bromley, Lewisham and the majority of other local authorities around the country.

The Greenwich-based project, Community Advice Greenwich (CAG), is a partnership of Greenwich Council, Greenwich CAB, Plumstead Law Centre and Meridian Money Advice. CAG aims to bring together a wide range of local charities supporting residents with legal, health and social problems. While the funding is limited we’re hopeful it will help create sustainable services that cater for the needs of local residents.

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Oak, or old Chestnut?

A mong the enduring myths that the residents of Greenwich so much love is that, in 1519, Henry VIII had danced beneath the branches of Elizabeth’s Oak in Greenwich Park with Anne Boleyn, the second of his six wives; and that Elizabeth 1st had played within its hollow trunk as a child. It is however unlikely ever to have been Anne Boleyn’s Oak, for she did not come to court until 1521. No doubt she could have frolicked beneath the tree later; more likely it was Mary Boleyn who cavorted with the King in Greenwich in 1519 – or indeed shock, horror, the two sisters’ mother.

William Pen, the leader of the Observant Franciscans of Greenwich, averred that he had told the king “ye could never marry Queen Anne for that it was said that ye had meddled with the mother and daughter.”

Be that as it may, more shock, horror later ensued with the claim that the oak tree is not an oak tree at all, but a chestnut. Fix this the origin of the room embodied in such phrases as “That is an old chestnut”, meaning, that is an old story that is no longer believable?
Pavement tax consultation

The Westcombe Society’s Environment Committee responded to the Council’s recent consultation on a new policy of licensing forecourt trading. Owners of cafes and shops now need a licence to place tables and chairs or display goods on the pavement outside their business. The fee is £7 per week for up to one square metre, and an extra £3.50 for each additional square metre. The Committee’s view is that, provided there is no safety issue or obstruction, being able to sit outside a cafe can add to the enjoyment of a meal or refreshment. Furthermore, the shopping environment is more attractive and appealing if flowers or goods are displayed on the pavement. This view is also shared by the Council. The Committee, however, disagrees with charging a licence fee for small shopping centres like the Standard where shopkeepers are already paying high rental charges (typically £12,000-14,000/year at the Standard). Tables and chairs outside cafes are particularly helpful for disabled customers and families with buggies who often find it difficult to navigate through awkward or narrow entrances.

The costs – to the shopkeepers, and to the Council in terms of administration – surely outweigh any possible benefits.

Heads in the sand?

That dust – sand from a sandstorm in the Sahara a month ago – all too vividly added to air pollution in London and elsewhere: but by far the biggest air-borne hazard is man-made pollution – vehicle exhaust emissions. Pedestrians in Greenwich and Newham need to “get the sand out of their eyes”, and accept that building new roads will only make air pollution worse, says the No to Silvertown Tunnel campaign. Children, walkers, joggers and cyclists, eager to enjoy the welcome spring warmth and sunshine were advised to stay indoors, but no politician had the courage to warn people against driving in London during the latest pollution incident. Contrast this with Paris, which imposed temporary driving restrictions to protect the population.

London mayor Boris Johnson, supported by borough councils in Greenwich, Newham and Bexley, is enthusiastically backing plans for a Silvertown road tunnel linking Greenwich and the Royal Docks. The proposed tunnel will bring yet more traffic to the already highly-congested Blackwall Tunnel approaches and Lower Lea Crossing, blighting local communities, and worsening the quality of life in areas all over East and South-east London.

A wealth of studies has shown that roadbuilding tends to increase traffic levels and congestion rather than smooth existing traffic flow. Increased air pollution then follows, and as a result we all suffer, with our children experiencing the worst of it. Their bodies are still forming, and are thus more susceptible to the environmental toxins in motor vehicle exhausts. Other London boroughs, including Lewisham and Tower Hamlets, have expressed grave concerns about the effect of a Silvertown Tunnel. However, Greenwich and Newham councils are strongly in favour of a new road tunnel. The No to Silvertown Tunnel campaign says locals should be quizzing candidates for this month’s council election about whether they back a road-building project which will blight their neighbourhoods.

No to Silvertown Tunnel spokesman Darryl Chamberlain says: “Nobody is addressing the root cause of air pollution. That is motor traffic. Instead, local politicians want to make matters worse by building a new road tunnel, even though there is not a shred of evidence that it will bring real economic benefits. A Silvertown Tunnel will only add to traffic congestion which is already unbearable. "Politicians need to get the sand out of their eyes. The Silvertown tunnel is no solution to our pollution."

What do readers think? Ed.

ENVIRONMENT

TIM BARNES, chairman of The Westcombe Woodlands, provides this Woodland Update.

The Friends of the Woodlands have continued to make good progress during the monthly volunteer days. The glide area which has been accessed from the rear of Nick Mountfield’s house in Maze Hill, now has 8 fruit trees at its heart to complement the fine old pear tree which is currently in full blossom. We have sowed the soil round the trees with a mixture of grass and wild seed which is now beginning to show through, and are extending the cleared area towards the back of the Maze Hill gardens. The proposal is to create a pond at one corner of the glide, and an application to the Capital Clean Up Fund for that purpose has recently been made. We have secured the agreement of those responsible for the Seven Park development to allow us to install a gate in the wire fencing marking the boundary between the Car Park and the woodlands. This will provide the main access point to the woodlands, and we are re-constructing a path from the new gate to the glide.

We planted large crops of native blue-bells along the path to the glide and they are about to come into flower. We hope to plant more wild flowers elsewhere.

The mound area toward Tom Smith Close is also being transformed. Large numbers of hazel and other whips have been planted to stabilize the slope and create an attractive feature. The sowing of the slopes with rough grass and wild flower mix last autumn may have to be repeated in view of the heavy rain we had.

At Lasserre Place we are extending the cleared path to the top of the hill where we hope to mark the view with a bench, and some attractive planting of native species; We are always conscious of the unique attractions of these woodlands.

Wendy Shelton, outgoing secretary of the Blackheath Society, reports: “Thirty volunteers, plus one seven-year old and one dog turned up to clear litter from the Heath on a Saturday afternoon in March. The result: this waist-high pile of black plastic bags under the bike in the front of this picture.”

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