

TUNBRIDGE WELLS

A REPORT

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by
The Tunbridge Wells Civic Association

1945

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Chapter Four

OPEN SPACES

The Commons—Additional Common Land

THE COMMONS.

Horace, the Roman poet, tells in one of his Satires the story of the Country Mouse and the Town Mouse. The Country Mouse lived on meagre fare in a miserable little hovel, but enjoyed safety and freedom ; whereas the sophisticated Town Mouse lived sumptuously but amid perpetual dangers and alarms. This fable is mentioned merely to point out the considerable advantages both parties would have derived from such a satisfactory compromise as Tunbridge Wells. Here the countryside is brought into the very centre of the town, and owing to the Commons on the Western side, we are fortunate to have avoided to a great extent that offensive ribbon development that spoils the entrance to so many towns.

There can be few other places where a large and unspoiled Common lies within a stone's throw of the main shopping centre. Plenty of towns, certainly, have gardens and parks, but the great charm of Tunbridge Wells Common is that it has been left to speak for itself and much of its natural beauty has been preserved. It has escaped the ravages of both time and men—and men can do infinitely more damage than time if they once make up their minds that nature, like patriotism is not enough. Psychologists take pains to distinguish between nature and nurture ; it is nurture, they tell us, superimposed on nature, that is often responsible for all our complexes, fixations, manias and obsessions. People or places, the principle is the same. We are all familiar with gardens both public and private whose unhappy features betray such bewilderment and lack of purpose that they are anything but the restful retreats for which they are intended.

The guardians of the Commons have fortunately observed the distinction between nurture and nature, with the result that it is still possible to recognise Tunbridge Wells Common as the "Heath opposite the Wells," as it was known in earlier days. The first guardians were the villagers who stood out against the Lord of the Manor of Rusthall at the end of the seventeenth century. He had persuaded the freehold tenants of the land near the Wells to let him rent it for herbage on a fifty-year lease, and he had no scruples in sub-letting it for building purposes. The freehold tenants were powerless to act until the lease expired, by which time most of them were sleeping with the other forefathers of the hamlet. Their heirs, however, were determined to avenge this callous exploitation, and defeated the Lord of the Manor in a long lawsuit. As a result, the Common was safeguarded from being built on by an Act of Parliament in 1739, and at the same time the Spring was declared public property for ever.

So the Common has remained the charming ambassador of the wider countryside beyond the town, and is with Rusthall and Southborough Commons, as beautiful as any of the Kent and Sussex borderland: there is the same springy turf, broom and bracken, heather and gorse, wooded slopes of oak, birch, Scotch fir, rowan, beech. We must do all we can to keep this charming country in its natural state. Instead of asphalt paths, it should be traversed by narrow paths, winding—as country paths naturally do—only to avoid trees and water and the outcrop of rocks and boulders. Our main recommendation for the Commons is that nothing should be done in the name of planning to interfere with their present character, except where that character has deteriorated—as, for instance, the very dull and shabby part of Rusthall Common where it borders the High Street and the closely built-up area. In such cases the planting of trees and other plants naturally suitable could do much to improve the appearance of particular areas, but it is the considered opinion of the Civic Association that planting for the sake of planting would be a mistake. We are well aware, however, that there may be a number of people who hold an opposite view: it has in fact been suggested in a minority report presented to the Association that the Common should be developed as a beauty spot with the extensive planting of ornamental trees, such as wild cherry and American thorn, and of daffodils, bluebells, primroses, etc. We feel, however, that the Common is not the right place for this kind of development, which should be reserved for more formal public grounds. In the most beautiful parts of both Commons the natural features are sufficient in themselves.

Some of the less wild parts have already been made use of for cricket grounds and for seats and shelters. These cricket pitches (and that on Southborough Common) are set in surroundings as beautiful as any in the country, and have become historic on account of the giants of the game who have played on them. We strongly urge that they should be preserved, and every encouragement given to the clubs that use them. In all cases oak posts and rails should define the playing areas. There should be more seats of suitable design (but not the pseudo-rustic, dead-tree-varnished kind) placed in both sunny and shady spots overlooking the grounds.

If new Cricket Grounds are provided elsewhere in the town, as suggested in Chapter 8, this use of the Lower Ground might be allowed to lapse.

Another sport that should be encouraged and could be much better catered for is horse riding. We urge that part of the old racecourse should be made into a ride on the well-defined track, with new sections where this has disappeared, so that riding can be enjoyed all the year round. Safe crossings over Major York's and other roads should be afforded by light single-span bridges, by subways, or by post and rails, to prevent sudden intrusion on the roads. Tunbridge Wells should have its Rotten Row, and the part of the ride running parallel to Mount Ephraim would be the most suitable for this purpose.

We must remember the children, too. To the child's eye the Common is a world on its own, a place for all sorts of games and adventures and expeditions. Everything grows in stature: the rocks are cliffs, the hills strategic vantage points.

No kingdom is complete, as Stevenson observed, without its seas. Reducing the ideal to a material level, we could in fact provide for paddling, model boating—and the mere wetness of water which appeals so strongly to children—by making a shallow pool round the lower side of the rocks on Tunbridge Wells Common, opposite to the Wellington Hotel. The pond should of course be most carefully sited, and sited to follow some natural outline such as the footpath which now skirts the rocks and sand. Done with taste and imagination, it should prove a very attractive feature.

During the last century there were actually six or seven ponds on Tunbridge Wells Common ; by the end of the century, however, all but two had been filled in or drained. Of those that have disappeared, the one near Mount Edgcumbe at the foot of the rocks must have been the most picturesque ; but it doubtless became very dirty with rotting leaves from the adjacent trees. A Pond such as we suggest, however, would have no trees near it, and it should have a concrete bottom with facilities for renewing the water periodically.

The two old ponds that remain, known as the Brighton Lake and Fir Tree Pond have been very badly neglected. They should be taken in hand and preserved, for they add greatly to the beauty of the countryside. A poet once wrote : " Clear evening sky, still water : heaven hath poised mood over mood." But he was describing water that reflected the sky above it not ' thick, dingy paste of diluted mud. This is only a small point, perhaps, but it is important both ' principle and practice. We want a town that looks pleasant and well cared for not only to the superficial eye but also to the investigating eye.

One last point : in the report on the Future Development of Tunbridge Wells published in 1936, it was suggested that the rocky face to the high terrace of Mount Ephraim between the bastions of " Gibraltar " and " St. Helena " should have some of the soil removed so that a cliff face of rock could be exposed. If this were done, and suitable wild rock plants massed on the ledges, a charming effect could be obtained at very little cost.

ADDITIONAL COMMON LAND.

The Civic Association considers that more land should be added to the Commons. If we are to take land from them {and it will be necessary to do so to a small extent if the improvements in traffic facilities referred to in Chapter 3 are to be carried out) the equivalent amount must be added. But let us be far-reaching and add more than the bare minimum. We suggest that the fields between Hungershall Park and the railway should be one of these areas. The hedges should be removed, and this is a case where limited planting—forest trees, gorse, heather—would be advisable in order to bring the land into line with 'the character of the adjoining Common. A footpath or narrow country road roughly following the line of the contours should be made from the Eridge Road to the High Rocks Lane, which would link the open country with the Common.

A second area which should be acquired and added to Rusthall Common is part of the grounds of Rusthall Beacon. Here copses slope to the line of ponds, and a stream runs down to the High Rocks Lane joining the brook which forms the County boundary. If these suggestions are put into practice the two Commons will be linked by footpaths through this " Happy Valley," as it is so rightly called, and a strip of lovely country preserved for the town for all time.