

Kingston Action Group – Meadow Planting Proposal

Ref: KPC Meeting 13 May 2020 Appendix 12

The future management of St Pancras Green and The Village Green (aka Juggs Green)

1 Summary of action to date

Early in 2019, the Kingston Action Group wrote to the Kingston Parish Council (KPC) proposing a modified management regime on a small portion of St Pancras Green. It was agreed that the essentials of this paper appear in the May edition of The Kingston News (TKN). It was made clear in the ensuing article that the Council had yet to form a view but would be guided by the public response. People were invited to write to TKN or to the Council. In the event, 25 submissions were made to the KPC. Of these 20 were broadly in favour of the proposal and five against.

A slightly modified version of the article was then submitted to the KPC for discussion at its meeting in July. Eleven members of the public attended this meeting and raised a series of points, largely in opposition to the proposal. One member of the Council spoke against the proposal as it stood.

Following discussion, the Council resolved to ask the Action Group to provide more detail about their proposal, covering in particular the following areas:

- i the proposed propagation method, whether seed, plug plants, turf or natural growth
- ii how the area would be managed and by whom
- iii the time period over which the success of the project might be evaluated
- iv alternative sites in the village for the establishment of a meadow.

When such details had been provided, the Parish Clerk would seek advice from the grass cutting contractors on the financial implications of the proposal.

The Action Group's response was a modified paper, considered at the November meeting of the KPC. However, the Council considered that this paper still failed to provide sufficient detail, particularly on the questions of the precise plans, the dimensions of the area proposed to be affected, the costs of the project, the issue of timing and criteria for its evaluation. This paper aims to fill in those gaps. The arguments for or against the scheme itself are perhaps now well enough known but lest it be thought that we are ignoring the objections which were put forward these are dealt with in an Annex to this paper.

A further reason for the inclusion of the Annex is that this may help the two newest members of the KPC who have joined the Council since this issue was first raised - to appreciate both sides of the debate.

2 Developments since the earlier paper

There have been two significant developments. The first is the introduction in Parliament of the Environment Bill. This was, in March, about to go to the Committee stage. Progress was then of course interrupted by the second development – the spread of Covid 19. However, the Bill will

almost certainly become law later this year or early in 2021 and given the Government's majority it is likely to pass more or less unamended.

The Bill introduces a statutory obligation on all public authorities in England to "conserve and enhance" biodiversity.

Part 6, para 93 of the Bill says:

"A public authority which has any functions exercisable in relation to England must from time to time consider what action the authority can properly take, consistently with the proper exercise of its functions, to further the general biodiversity objective".

It has earlier defined what the "general biodiversity objective" is and goes on to say what authorities have to do and by when. Authorities must complete their "consideration" within one year of this part of the legislation coming into force.

Like other public authorities, the KPC will have to give thought to what action it intends to take to comply with this new law.

3 Future Plans

After much thought, the Group concluded first that the simplest option – i.e. allowing the grass on sections of both village greens to be allowed to grow throughout the spring and summer – would offer a good route forward on the grounds that it would be both the cheapest and the least labour intensive. However, we would also like to complement this with plug planting, should we have the financial means to do this in the future. Seeding any bare areas is another option and an inexpensive one which could also be employed. We need not put all our eggs in one basket! Research suggests that even the simplest option will have some measurable effect on plant and insect life and this is the course of action now being pursued in many of the Royal Parks. Plug planting and re-seeding though, if successful, would clearly make the areas concerned look more attractive more quickly and would also have the potential to attract more insects. These areas would be clearly marked out immediately before the next cut of the growing season (perhaps with rope or branches) and then removed. Thereafter, the areas to be left uncut would be obvious. The entire areas would then be cut back to the same height as the intensively managed areas at the end of the summer or early autumn – whenever the grass is cut for the last time in the year.

A similar course of action is now being followed in the management of The Paddock in Lewes, where ESCC recently decided to leave the edges unmown to encourage wildflowers to grow. Log piles are to be created there to encourage biodiversity.

4 Dimensions of the areas to be left uncut

We were asked to consider "alternative sites" for the trials. The only other possible such site is the village green. However, this is rarely visited other than by parents with young children and so the visual impact of a trial here would be extremely limited. For that reason, we would like the trial to run simultaneously on both village greens, though on a far smaller area on St Pancras Green than originally proposed. This is in acknowledgement of the fact that a number of people are opposed to any change at all on St Pancras Green, although it must also be remembered that these proposals do nonetheless have support from many others.

St Pancras Green

We would like an area of c 60 yards by 10 yards on the western side of St Pancras Green, in front of the houses there. Measurement cannot be exact as the area would have a wavy edge. This would therefore amount to approximately 600 square yards which, as closely as we can calculate, **represents less than 3% of the total area of the green**, which we have measured as c 24,000 square yards.

We also propose a different management regime for another section of the green, around the tennis courts. This area is approximately 800 square yards, as closely as we can measure it.

These photo- shopped images of this second area should enable KPC members to envisage the area concerned.



This is how the area might look in the summer, if planted with species such as Ox-eye daisy, Black Knapweed, Field Scabious and Bird's Foot Trefoil.



This image represents the area at the end of summer, before the annual cut. The cuttings would be removed annually to avoid increasing the nutrients in the soil.

The total area affected by the proposed changes in management would be approximately 7% of the total.

The Village Green

We would also like c 1200 square yards of the village green to be similarly treated, representing about 34% of the total area there (taken to be 4080 square yards). The most appropriate area to be left uncut in our view would be a strip c 20 yards by 60 yards, with the long measurement running parallel with Ashcombe Lane along the line of the hedge (planted by the Action Group some ten years ago). We have in past years planted snowdrops, primroses and other wildflowers here. The whole of the area around the playground would remain unaffected.

No special management of either of these areas would be required during the growing season – i.e. March to September – other than plug planting where possible. At the end of that time, however, all the grass would be cut and all the cuttings collected and removed from the site by volunteers from the Action Group. If this cut and collect regime were repeated annually, then the soil fertility would gradually reduce, allowing an increasing number of wildflowers to compete with the existing vigorous rye grass.

There might be an issue with the disposal of the cuttings. On the village green, these could usefully be piled up in a corner or corners where they would provide a compost heap which itself would soon become home to many invertebrates and, in all likelihood, hibernating hedgehogs. On St Pancras Green, the volume of grass would be far smaller but would still need to be dealt with. The contractor might be willing to take it away. Other options might include a compost heap in the corner of the wooded area (with the permission of the landowner) or elsewhere nearby. It is a potential challenge though far from an insuperable one.

5 Management costs

We are sure that the contractors managing the greens would be willing to make the minor adjustments we are proposing at no additional expense: indeed, it is at least possible that the proposed management could cost less than the existing one.

The Kingston Action Group could bear the cost of any plant plugs or seeds.

6 Timing and monitoring

We propose that the new management regime begins this year and lasts, initially, for five years. Members of the Action Group and sympathetic residents could to some degree monitor the effect of the management changes on the wildlife as some would be clear and obvious, for example the presence of bees or butterflies. However, we propose that there are two or more botanical surveys, to be conducted in the spring and late summer. How many there might be would be partly dependent on cost but the absolute minimum would be one at the outset of the trial and one at the end. These would compare the plant diversity in those parts of the village greens where the grass continues to be cut at regular intervals all through the spring and summer months, with that in the area where the grass is left uncut. At the end of the five year trial period, whether there has been an increase in plant diversity should be very clear. If there has not, the Council will have to decide whether to continue the trial or abandon it.

The initial survey could be carried out by anyone with minimal botanical knowledge since very few plant species are currently present on either of the green.

7 Summary

- The areas we propose to be part of the trial amount to around 7% of St Pancras Green and c 34% of the village green.
- Here, the grass would be allowed to grow during spring and summer but be cut at the end of the growing season – towards the end of September.
- Any bare areas could be seeded and, if money permits, we would add plug plants.
- We suggest a trial period of five years, during which there should be **at least** two botanical surveys, one in May 2020 and one at the end of the trial period.
- We fully expect the biodiversity of the areas left uncut to increase during the trial period and for some insects to be attracted. This would constitute success.
- If this trial is agreed, it would constitute at least a degree of the statutory duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity which is about to be imposed on all public authorities by the Environment Bill, whenever enacted.

Annex

Response to points raised by members of the public at the July meeting of the KPC

a 2500 playing fields in the UK have disappeared since 2010 and local councils are no longer making provision for them.

b St Pancras Green was specifically put aside and constructed by residents as an intended sports field and a huge effort was made to make the area into a recreational field (the only one in the village).

c Instead of meadow planting, more effort should be made to enhance the use of the field for sports to complement the sports changing facilities in the Pavilion

While we have no reason to dispute either of the first two contentions and agree that the first is much to be regretted – neither point is relevant as our proposal would not affect the status nor the use of St Pancras as a playing field. As far as the third point goes, we strongly support the idea of making greater use of the field for sports and have in the past suggested the installation of a boules court and the provision of a table tennis table. We are still in favour of both.

d The village is surrounded by “acres of wildlife” so such a small area would have minimal effect.

It's true that there are still some areas close to the village that are relatively rich in wildlife although it cannot be said that we are “surrounded” by them. Some of the surrounding land is arable and therefore of virtually no wildlife value at all. Much is improved pasture, which is also of low wildlife interest. It's also accepted that the small area we propose trying to create would have, in and of itself, relatively little effect compared with the devastating losses faced by wildlife virtually everywhere in the UK. However we would argue that even such a small area as this could over time have a substantial impact in terms of its effect on people's attitudes to wildlife. We would hope that once people now opposed to the scheme start to see bees, butterflies and other insects beginning to visit the greens in numbers they may better appreciate the changes. We also believe that children, certainly, will make the connection between plants and the other wildlife they support and enjoy the different experience that more diverse long grass offers in comparison with short grass. Finally, it should be noted that our suggestion is part of a much wider national trend. All over the country, local authorities and other landowners are looking to see what contribution they can make to offset at least a part of the habitat losses which have taken place over the last 50 years and more. The management of the Royal Parks has been transformed in recent years and huge swathes of Green Park, Hyde Park, Greenwich Park and others are now left uncut during the summer months.

In England there are around 4.5 million hectares of grassland, of which just 100,000 - around 2.5% - are unimproved species rich grassland which support habitat for a large number of plants, insects, birds and mammals. About 90% of species rich grassland was lost in the 20 century, often as a result of chemical fertilisers, herbicides and new grass varieties being used to increase yields.

Even some of the areas which are still relative species rich, are now dominated by coarse grasses like tor grass, possibly as a result of nitrogen enrichment delivered atmospherically. Tor grass spreads rapidly and out-competes most other species.

Finally, we should make the point that this is not just about saving wildlife! Many studies have shown that exposure to wildlife and nature has a measurable positive effect on our wellbeing. We would

strongly argue therefore that the changes we proposed would be beneficial to humans as well as other species.

e The Pavilion roof is supposed to be wild meadow planting but is not maintained or managed properly.

This may or may not be true but does not seem to be relevant; it does not follow that because that roof is not managed the same will apply elsewhere. A planted area on a roof is clearly rather more difficult to manage than one on the ground.

f Cannot go solely by numbers for and against the proposal as the reasons given need consideration. The responses received represented a little over 7% of households so not enough to sway a decision and the detail of response should be taken into account.

These observations seem to argue that the views of some people are more worthy of consideration than those of others. There may of course have been all sorts of reasons why some supporters did not go into detail in their submissions to the KPC and we would argue that it is rather undemocratic not to treat all "votes" equally. In the event, there were four times as many people in favour of the proposal as there were against and the KPC agreed that its decision would be "guided by the public response".

Response to points made in written submissions to the KPC not covered above

There were five submissions to the KPC raising objections to the proposal, although one of these was qualified by the statement that there would be no objection if the changes were restricted to a narrow strip of St Pancras Green near the woodland.

The main objections from the other four were based on the notions that the proposal would result in untidiness "or mess", that the changed areas could not be managed properly and that as there were wildflowers elsewhere in or around the village, there was no need for any more.

The point about management is addressed in the main paper. The issue of untidiness is harder to deal with as it demonstrates a profound difference in perception between opposing viewpoints. Nature – however modified by human activity - is inherently "untidy". Some see this as objectionable, while for others it is either irrelevant or a positive attraction. Similarly, while some clearly appreciate the current appearance of St Pancras Green – orderly, neat, regimented, tidy – to others it appears monotonous, dreary, uninspiring and even depressing. We can only argue that our proposals would affect only a very small part of the total and that more than 97% of the area would remain unchanged.

In this context, it is worth re-iterating the views of the judge in last year's **South and South East in Bloom Competition** when Kingston's first ever entry received a Silver-Gilt award. He was particularly taken with the efforts already being made by many in the village to enhance biodiversity in different ways. He said that "a great many of the residential gardens and open spaces around the Parish have been inspired by the local countryside. There are many unmown front lawns and naturalised areas along with native planting around perimeters of public open spaces. Biodiversity is an important feature around the Parish". The proposal for the two Greens would therefore build on work already done.

The final point made was that there was, effectively, more than enough wildlife in the locality already and that any addition was therefore unnecessary.

Britain has inflicted more damage on its wildlife than any other country in the world. Since the end of the last war alone, we have destroyed a huge proportion of our richest wildlife habitats including ancient woodland, peat bogs, heathland and chalk grassland. The greatest loss of all has been of wildlife meadows, with only 2% remaining of those which existed just 50 years ago.

It is no exaggeration to say that wildlife in the UK now faces an existential crisis. As a recent report on wildlife* made clear, one in seven of the 8400 species of plants, mammals, bird and insects is at risk. A quarter of Britain's mammals face local extinction as do almost 50% of the nation's birds. Wildflowers have probably even worse, having been pretty well eradicated from farmland, which covers 80% of the country. Local extinctions are going on apace. The insect population has fallen dramatically, and with it, the numbers of insectivorous birds. Under these circumstances, it's hardly surprising that the editors of the Oxford Junior Dictionary decided in 2007 that there would be no place in future for words like bramble, bluebell and acorn since these were things no longer encountered by most children. We would therefore argue that there is **every** need for more wildlife, wherever it can be accommodated.

- State of Nature Report, published 3 October 2019 by the State of Nature Partnership