



Annual Report for 2015

This time last year I was able to give you all a pretty upbeat report of all the developments on Midsummer Common that FoMC had been involved with over the year. Sadly this progress has not always been maintained this year, due to a number of unforeseen circumstances. So let's begin with the positives.

The orchard was looking particularly lovely in the summer thanks to the tireless commitment of Dick and Barry, and our rather rushed sowing of wildflowers after the extensive work on the entrance worked surprisingly well. The new maintenance schedule for the main Common was also working well and once the cows arrived the common was looking lovely. We had three requests for permission to plant commemorative trees in the orchard, and these were individually discussed with the Orchard Manager and our tree advisor Kenny McGregor, and suitable species agreed: a great welcome addition to our fruiting stock. We also came to an amicable agreement with the Synagogue for the replanting of the hedging at the back of their new building, and this seems to be growing well. Our bees seemed well established, with the prospect of some honey at the orchard picnic! Our Swift Project progressed well, and thanks to the tireless assistance of Dick Newell from Action for Swifts the nesting boxes and transmitter were fitted to the Elizabeth Way Bridge, although, not unexpectedly, no swifts found their way to establish nests this year. (The transmitter will be turned on again before the AGM.) We made our first tentative attempts to monitor the bats on the Common with our new bat detector.

I reported last year on our push to improve the publicity for what we do, and this has resulted in a very welcome addition of 22 paid up members since the last AGM. I know, from talking to people passing through the orchard when we are digging and planting, that many, many more appreciate the beauty of the Common and the quiet orchard area: the benches are well used. We had minor problems with rough sleepers on the Common and in the Orchard: if they do not move on when asked politely to do so we contact the appropriate Council official and on the whole things are sorted out amicably.

So what went wrong later in the year? Firstly I had a very bad accident in August, which meant that I was not able to oversee the vital autumn work on the wildflower meadow and entrance area, and the Council seemed unable to give us any assistance with mowing and cutting back. Then our bees were mysteriously poisoned, and our fruit crop was again stripped before the date for our picnic. In the end we sadly had to cancel the picnic, with not enough able people around at the time to do the preparations. Finally, the digging of the trenches of the new Granta Backbone added insult to injury in the orchard, leaving a dreadful mess and destroying what little planting we had been able to do in the entrance area. Our priority this spring and summer must be to work to make this an attractive entrance and we will need to establish some more regular volunteering sessions to make this happen: my digging legs are still not very strong!

Our Constitution states that 'The primary purpose of FoMC is to elicit support and make representations to the appropriate authorities in order to encourage the good management of Midsummer Common.' So what progress have we made this year? The newly refurbished paths have been broadly welcomed and, after extensive local consultation, a plan for the improvements to other paths and for the messy area around the Fort St George has finally, this week, been approved

by the Secretary of State. There will now be a meeting of the steering group (of which I am a member) to agree a final schedule of work. Not everyone will agree with all the details of the submitted plan, but the FoMC committee generally support what is proposed to deal safely with the ever increasing footfall of a diverse population of users. The other debate this year has been over the upgrading of the lighting on the Common, and we are still uncertain as to what the final outcome will be.

No Annual Report would be complete without some comment on the parking issue. After years of supplying photographic evidence of continual parking violations around the Fort St George and Midsummer House area and the consistent pressure from Dick Baxter (and others) we had a useful meeting with relevant Councillors and Council officials, including, finally, someone from the legal department. With the new more effective barrier, the Council seems at last more willing to start putting the pressure on where appropriate. This is going to be particularly important once the refurbishment of the area is completed and we await progress with interest. We are also awaiting the decision from the County Council on the designation of the path linking Auckland Road to the orchard as a public right of way, now that all the supporting evidence has been submitted to them by our Archivist.

The arrangements for the large city-wide events on the Common, as recommended by the new Management Plan for Midsummer Common, have generally worked well. We ran a highly successful FoMC stall in the children's section of the Strawberry Fair, and will shortly be recruiting volunteers to help man our stall at this year's Fair, to be held on June 4. Despite pressure from event organisers it has been agreed that there will be no increase in the numbers of Fairs and Circuses, and other large public events. After pressure from FoMC some of the very many charity events have been moved to other venues such as Coldhams Common, especially those with no direct link to the City. Even before the tragic accident at Bonfire Night this year FoMC has been concerned to try and restrict the weight of the lorries that are allowed on to the Common for these events, particularly during the winter months. Not only do such large vehicles cause considerable environmental damage, compacting vulnerable tree roots and aggravating drainage problems, but increasingly accidents are bound to happen when lorries manoeuvre on very busy pedestrian and cycle routes. Closing such vital routes on Common land in the interest of safety will cause considerable public opposition. We would welcome more public discussion this year on the future of the traditional, often much loved, events.

The Committee recognises the severe financial restraints under which our local councils are operating, and I would like personally to thank our Councillors and many Council officials for the support that they give us in often difficult circumstances. We are grateful for some continual financial support though a Community Grant this year, even if our Treasurer sometimes despairs over the complexities of the long application form! It does at least cover some of our essential expenses such as insurance for volunteers, although we have in the past been promised some overarching Council support for this. All we ask is that action that is agreed is implemented in an efficient and cost effective way.

Three Committee members will be standing down this year- Erica Hunter, Simon Bragg and Robert Day - and I would like to take this opportunity of thanking them for all the work that they have done. They have all contributed to particularly lively debates in our committee meetings over many issues that are not always straightforward, and for this, as Chair, I am more than grateful.

Susan Stobbs (Chair)
27 April 2016