

# Annual Report for 2019

It has been an unusual year on the Common. The annual rounds of events in 2019 were less troublesome than usual. That is not to say there were no complaints, especially regarding Midsummer Fair. Vehicle movements and parking on the Common remains a never ending problem but there have been glimmering signs of Council control. The grassland has displayed a growing richness of wildflowers but not all to popular acclaim. The cows never cease to attract passing interest. And the Community Orchard remains a popular place to relax and pick fruit.

Entry into 2020 has been overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic. For those living nearby, the Common bereft of through traffic and events has been an idyllic place to visit. The cows have certainly enjoyed the uninterrupted stay. What a difference a year makes on Midsummer Common!

## Events on the Common.

One of FoMC's objectives is to encourage the public use and enjoyment of Midsummer Common. To this end, FoMC welcomes events held on the Common. Another objective is to work with organisers to ensure that these events have minimal impact and cause no nuisance to local residents and boat owners. To this end, FoMC has raised issues of concern over the years and changes have resulted.

The Council schedules events across Cambridge and Midsummer Common gets its share. Fairs, circuses, running and cycling events, and bonfire night are regular attendees. They are popular and draw large crowds. Locals question the early arrival and parking of trucks on the Common - they are an eyesore and damage the grassland - and the removal of the cattle. Strawberry and Midsummer Fairs raise special issues.

Strawberry Fair is a 1-day event that has grown in ambition and changed its style since its inception in the 1970s. It takes place in the first week of June and has always been held on Midsummer Common. It went through a bad phase 5 years back with drink and drug problems, excessive littering and parking in the neighbourhood and abusive behaviour. The Council stopped it for a year and then allowed it to reappear in a more acceptable format. Strawberry Fair was a good event in 2019 although FoMC did not mount its stall in the children's section again. Like other events, Strawberry Fair will not appear in 2020.

Midsummer Fair has a 800-year history in Cambridge. FoMC was not involved in preparations for the 2019 Fair, the management of which had been moved from the Council to the Showmen's Guild. FoMC regretted this exclusion. The FoMC Committee met 2 weeks before Midsummer Fair started to discuss problems that could emerge. Two representatives from the Showmen's Guild, a City Council officer, two councillors, and the manageress of the Fort St George pub joined the meeting. It was a frank exchange in which FoMC expressed concern about the change of management, keeping the neighbouring residential areas safe (by fencing and bridge closures), keeping vehicles moving and enforcing parking restrictions, and maintaining a police presence. FoMC expressed concern about the location of activities and facilities on the Common. The Guild agreed to hold a walkabout briefing before the Fair started and on the Saturday. The City officer and councillors promised an active involvement.

The fair started arriving on Sunday - it was much larger than last year. A wall of tape was put around the Common for 3 days to keep people away from vehicle movements; this was not appreciated by some dog walkers. The first briefing at 10am on Wednesday was attended by the Guild organiser, two FoMC Committee members, the police superintendent and a Council officer. The fair rides and trader stalls were in place. Questions were raised about toilets (which arrived at that point) and litter bins (large skips were in evidence). The general take home message was that the Guild saw their responsibility ending at the edge of the Common. Vehicle movements and parking were the responsibility of others, as was the policing of people.

The fair started on Wednesday (with the usual ceremonies) and continued until Monday. Attendance throughout was much below previous years. In the words of one trader "it was the worst Cambridge ever". The Guild said takings were down but this was a national picture. Those attending clearly enjoyed themselves. Including those who stayed around the Fort pub. But there were problems.

Fairs are noisy events. Some rides are noisier than others. It was unfortunate that these were located together near the river which angered Chesterton residents. Better location of rides and noise abatement should be exercised in future. Diesel fumes coming from the many generators feeding electricity to the rides, stalls and caravans filled the Common and drifted into the neighbouring streets. This was a particularly noxious pollutant which contravened Council (and government) clean air policy. Consideration should be given to restricting generating capacity in future. Events attract litter which needs to be managed. Plastic drink containers ended up in the fairground or in the river. Attendees brought their own liquor bottles and glasses which ended up in similar places with glass being broken. The scene on Saturday evening was horrendous. Clearing this up on Sunday morning was a monumental effort and caused friction between the Guild, the pub, and the public. Litter collection and disposal must be handled much better in future. Vehicle movements on Victoria Avenue were better than the previous year, possibly because there were fewer cars. But congestion did ripple through the town on Saturday. Car parking on the Common for traders and fairgoers seemed to be well managed but there was an overflow on Saturday. This led to illegal parking in the Brunswick and Chesterton areas which infringed residential parking rights. But it was better controlled than last year and the police did a good job.

Traders left on Saturday and Sunday morning and the fair started packing up on Monday evening. They were nearly all gone by Tuesday evening. Fencing was removed and the cows reappeared on Wednesday. Cleaning the site was not done well. Much was left behind, mostly wood and metal props from the fair rides, and one fetid, muddy patch. These items remained long after the fair has gone.

To those living on North Terrace, this was one of the quietest Midsummer Fairs on record. This is because all the noisy events had been moved to the other side of the Common. The Council fence had a psychological effect in diverting people away from the houses and keeping urination out of the gardens. Saturday was a bad day for parking in the Brunswick roads; enforcement officers ticketed offenders and the police patrolled the area effectively. There were mixed feelings from those on the Chesterton side of the river. Some residents reported favourably on the fair. Closure of the footbridge by the Fort St George undoubtedly kept a lot of fairgoers out of the area. Cars were less trouble than in previous years but there was a lot of illegal parking. Enforcement officers could do little but ticket offenders. Some residents were severely pained by the noise levels and made repeated complaints to the Council. Like other events, Midsummer Fair will not appear on the Common in 2020. But lessons need to be learned in planning future fairs.

### **Parking on the Common**

Midsummer Common is 'common land' owned by Cambridge City Council. National and local legislation prohibits the unauthorised driving and parking of motorised vehicles on the Common and the Common is fenced with locked gates to control vehicular access. However, the House of Lords has ruled<sup>2</sup> that residents may drive across the Common if it is their sole means of access but this does not entitle them to park on the Common. Furthermore, the Council has ruled that vehicles servicing the two commercial properties, the Midsummer House Restaurant and the Fort St George Public House, may also drive across the Common but are not allowed to park. But this leaves loopholes and the Council seems unwilling to prosecute offenders.

Last year's annual report saw improvements in the parking restrictions with the manager and landlords of the pub being more co-operative. This has continued. FoMC actually held one of its Committee meetings in the pub as a sign of mutual goodwill. The manager is mostly compliant with the rules and, I believe, more understanding of FoMC's position. The restaurant, on the other hand, has dismissed public complaints and made no concessions. So FoMC will probably have to remind the Council every time it sees unauthorised parking outside the two premises.

## **State of the grassland**

It has always been the Council's policy to improve biodiversity on the Common. FoMC has played its part by trying to establish a wildflower meadow on Butt Green, putting a bat box high up in a tree in the eastern pound, and swift boxes next to Elizabeth Way bridge. But these all failed. The Council has removed shrubs between the pub and restaurant and cobbled over some of the grassland! The track record for biodiversity has not been good. Until 2019 when the grassland itself erupted into masses of thistles, nettles and other noxious weeds.

Walkers and dogs complained. Even the cows grazed away from the thistles. Only the caterpillars shouted with joy. Council mowers were slow to act in spite of the local uproar. When they did, the caterpillar supporters shouted out in dismay. Was this an exceptional year or a consequence of climate change? The nature lovers saw an exciting but prickly future. It got the Council biodiversity team to put their thinking caps on. What will the future hold?

## **The Community Orchard**

In her report last year, Susan said that "if you walk through the orchard you will see that it is looking lovely, with the blossom starting to emerge and the spring bulbs at the entrance adding some welcome colour". Laziness on the part of the mowing team let the grass grow too tall to cut. It was good to see and fun for youngsters to find a way through but the docs, nettles and thistles enjoyed the freedom and outstripped the grass. It took a great effort to get it under control with volunteers and a team from AstraZeneca working wonders. The Orchard manager vowed never to let it happen again.

The Orchard has a steady flow of people walking through - seeing the tree blossom and picking the fruit, examining the bushes and wildflowers in the Newmarket Road entrance, or relaxing with a picnic. Many students prefer it to a college library. A few have played on the boule court. Long may it continue.

## **Finally**

I want to thank our local hard working Councillors and Council officials and everyone who has supported FoMC over the year. And to our Committee for meeting and expressing their own ideas from which we try to reach a consensus. We usually do and hope members see it the same way. A special thanks to our secretary, Charles Hattersley, who has kept the membership in order. He is vacating the post but hopes to stay on the Committee. Nick Levine and Susan Woodsford are also saying goodbye but Nick promises to keep our computer server and website working. I will be looking to pass on the chairperson role next year and, as my predecessor said in last year's annual report, will be "looking forward to spending more time just quietly working in the orchard".

Dick Baxter  
Chair FoMC  
June 2019