

WHO'S FOR MORE TREES?

**A brief introductory background paper for a symposium
arranged by the Friends of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley**

Strange, that species of woodland and the human race itself, should be in crisis at the same time. Since the 70's Britain has lost 30 million elms. From 1990 disease has been found in oak, beech, chestnut, alder and larch. Since 2012 the country's most common tree – the ash – has largely succumbed to die back. Covid 19 has taken nearly 140,000 people in Britain since 2021 amid a worldwide pandemic; and deaths worldwide so far have numbered 4.9 million. The pandemic in humans reflects a world that sees people moving frequently across the globe for business, education and holidays. Woodland disease on the other hand follows from humans importing saplings and plant types from many parts of the world to satisfy consumer tastes and curiosity. Both reflect a world becoming ever more mobile and interdependent.

The pandemic for a while radically slowed down human movement across the globe - though restrictions imposed by governments are now being much relaxed following the development of vaccines; and international travel for business, education and holidaying is on the march again. But there seems to be less clarity, less consensus, about what action to take to control and remedy the impact of disease on the tree population - dangers and consequences perhaps less clear.

Campaigning begins

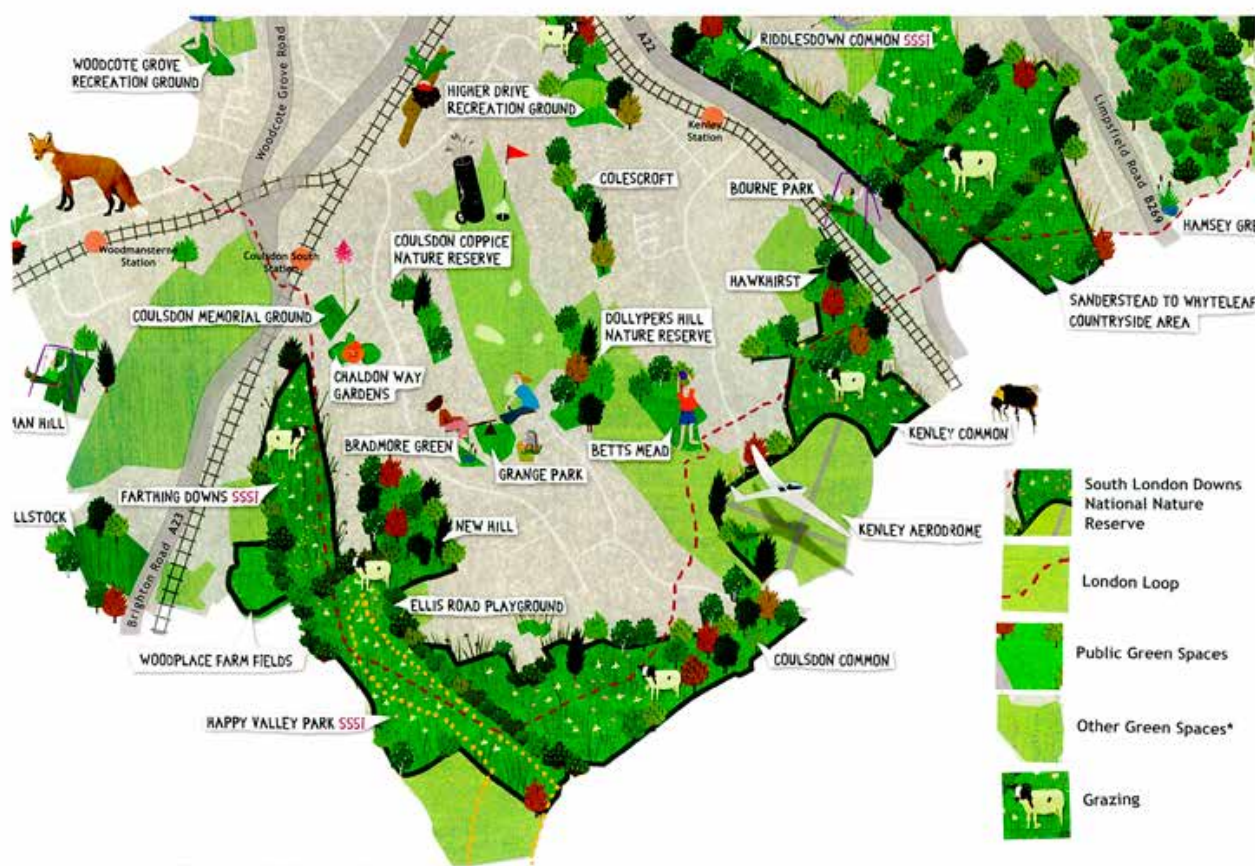
For the Queen's Platinum Jubilee in 2022, some 70 patches of ancient woodland across the country are being signaled for special conservation measures. On a wider front the Climate Change Commission is saying Britain needs to grow 30m new trees every year – covering twelve times the size of today's Epping Forest or 120 times the total size of our local National Nature Reserve here on the edge of Greater London – so as to reach a carbon neutral Britain by 2050. Government is planning to honour this ambition; which means upping its commitment to new planting by 50 percent. Quite a tall order. Woodland cover nationwide has only gone from 12 percent to 13 percent since 1998. Independently, the Woodland Trust in a major new Report *State of the UK's Trees 2021* sees itself sponsoring 50m trees. Combining these rates of growing – without taking account of annual losses – could apparently see Britain as densely wooded as in the late Middle Ages by 2050!

Tree planting is a growing business (!)

Just as there is suspicion that it was humankind itself that caused the Covid 19 pandemic – either through using wildlife to make exotic oriental dishes or by poor lab control in Wuhan – much if not most of the disease affecting woodland is also reckoned to be 'man made'. While some tightening of imported trees was introduced this year, tree imports have doubled what they were only four years ago (now standing at £100m in sales a year). Other outdoor plants have seen even bigger growth - up from £20m to £90m in the same period. With twenty or more serious tree pests imported since 1990, a key lesson for UK ecological strategy might have to be to abandon all imports of



saplings, and instead grow – develop – more UK tree nursery businesses. While in London streets and parks the plane tree seems to be the hardiest of all our trees, with great ability to withstand a dry and polluted atmosphere, Matthew Frith nevertheless reminded us in *Wildlondon* (2013) that the plane itself way back was of Spanish and even oriental origin. Not a London native at all!



Does south London have a greening deficit?

With a quarter of Croydon now labeled greenbelt, this question might seem misplaced. But lurking behind it is whether our concern should be just about replacing some of the canopy eroded over earlier decades, or has instead to be about helping fix the nation's huge carbon capture deficit. If it is the latter, what the 'fair' share of responsibility is for each community, would seem irrelevant. On a London-wide basis we could nevertheless do well to begin by checking current ambition and progress in greening against the Mayor of London's Big Green Fund, and his Pocket Parks Fund – introduced a decade ago – to test real ecological gain in a designated time period across London's green grid.

At our more local level, Croydon has just produced a draft Parks and Green Spaces Renewal Strategy for implementation over the next three years. Though as yet falling short of being a plan – that's due next year – the document underlines the need for continuing financial savings in ground maintenance and parks staff, while seeking external sources of finance, and getting further 'synergy' through closer working with volunteer and community groups. It refers to restarting the Croydon Green Fund. While tree planting started in 2018 will be extended by joining the Trees for Streets programme - where residents can help sponsor a tree - as yet there is no hint of tree planting being done more extensively across Croydon's open spaces. Nor is any mention made of the major consultancy report on open spaces and how best to manage them, commissioned by the Council from Tyrens in 2018. The new draft strategy comes on the back of demand by the Inspector at the Croydon Local Plan hearings to have the borough justify retaining quite a number of the smaller open spaces across Croydon – coppices, crofts and greens. Such spaces now have to be 'special' rather than just 'there'. A hint that housing is to predominate over greening.

The state of the suburbs

On the London-wide front, the picture is even more troubling. Getting trees planted on suburban London streets as part of greening, has to reckon with realities in the housing market. A new cadre of architect-builders has emerged throughout the suburbs that is typically replacing substantial freestanding dwellings set in large gardens with nine flats of varying size. Such 'intensification' is being claimed to be 'building back better', to achieve 'beautiful homes in leafy streets'. Leading architects have acclaimed that in this way suburbia will soon become 'superbia'. The reality is anything but. Neighbours and community groups are objecting.

And in greenbelt outside London developers are busy land grabbing to put up expensive executive homes. Government's response has been to seek to loosen planning controls, to encourage yet more building in these favoured areas – with the aim of reducing pressures, and ostensibly prices. Tory constituencies have revolted. The Minister responsible has been sacked. While a commitment remains to build 300,000 houses a year, it is not clear currently where else they will be built, since planned 'overspill' to less pressurized areas has ceased. Meantime intensification across south London goes on and on. The Woodland Trust's report indicates that trees outside woods are declining in number, as urbanization grows. 'Trees for Streets' is having to operate against this background.

Areas already green

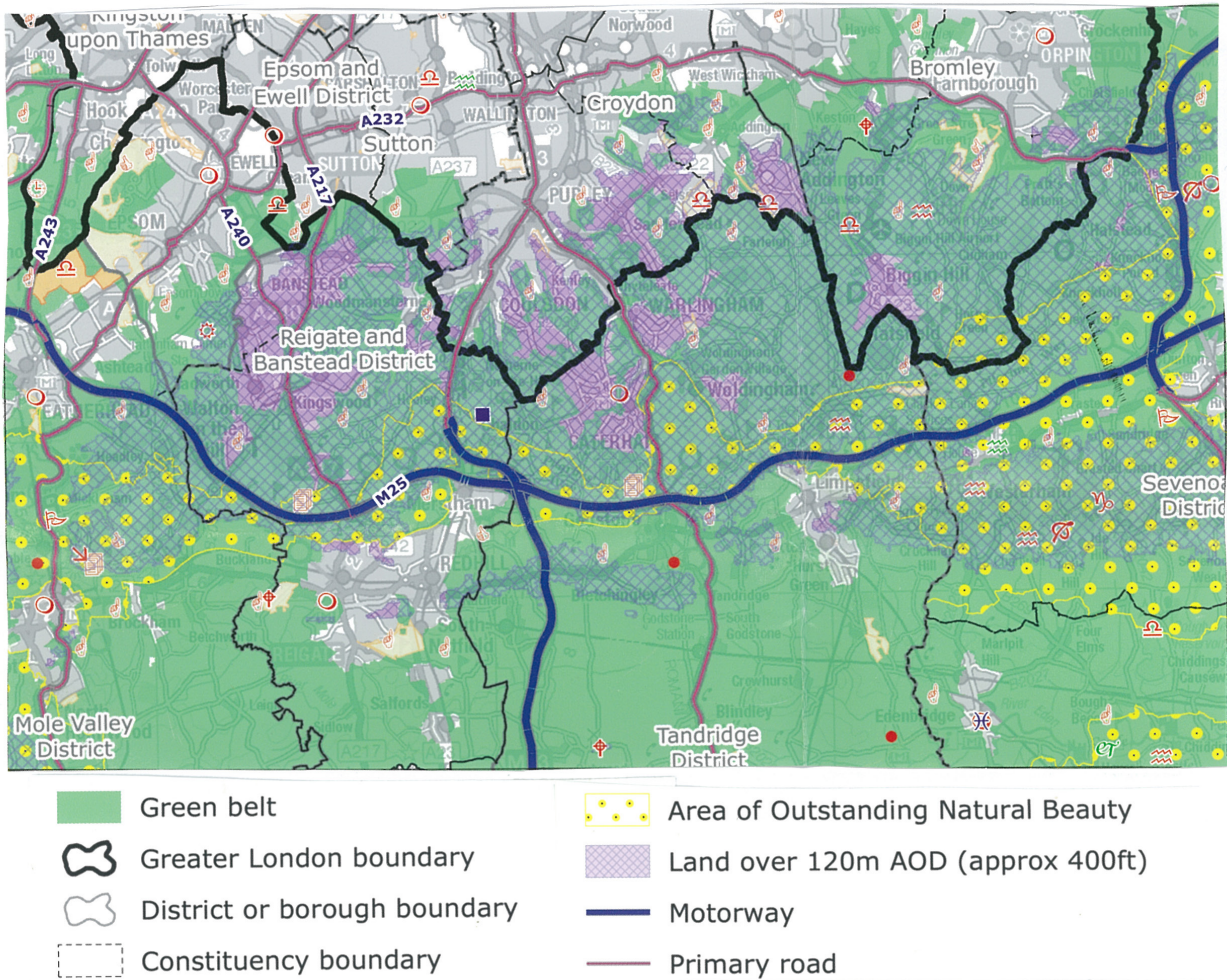
Could the South London NNR do more to capture carbon? Is it already 'in surplus'? What strategy best suits carbon capture? Currently about a third of all the land across the City Commons consists of long established woodland – 67 hectares in all on Coulsdon Common, Kenley Common, Riddlesdown, and Farthing Downs – out of 245 hectares. (Farthing Downs is the largest of the four 'commons' though its elevation and configuration means only 16 out of the 95 hectares is wooded). The four have some secondary woodland as well, but the greater part of the City Commons is grassland.

Should the felled ash on New Hill, Kenley and Riddlesdown be replaced? Should the many hedgerows on the Commons contain more trees? Should the beech 'folly' on Farthing Downs be extended? Could Kenley airfield take more trees without hindering the gliders? Should tree planting be used to replace nuisance larch, holly and buddleia? Having reintroduced grazing in the 1990's, is the balance between scrub, grassland, and grazing, now right? All in the name of carbon capture.

New ten year plans for each of the City Commons show that alongside concern for the health of all their woodland rangers are having to thin the upper canopy of woodland to encourage its understory, help stimulate ground cover and hence sustain conditions where a wide range of wildlife can flourish. Birdlife has fallen by 29 percent since 1970. For rangers it's an intricate biodiversity balancing act all-told, which ultimately justifies continued designation as a Nature Reserve.

Some wildlife arrives by rail! Badgers notably along the Brighton line; Croydon's rail network acting as a migration corridor for wildlife. At a recent Friends AGM the speaker noted however that National Rail's Vegetation Management Review now requires 6 metres track clearance, with no growth over about 6 feet. A significant reduction in habitat cover.

PROGRESS OVER 70 YEARS IN KEEPING THE SOUTH OF LONDON GREEN



Perspective on greening

In campaigning now to make suburban London greener, one should not overlook massive achievement made after 1955 in creating greenbelt all round London and its lasting impact. The local council here in Coulsdon was ahead of the game, purchasing in 1938 under special Act of Parliament particular local areas to keep them green – including Happy Valley. Wrapping London tightly in greenbelt that long ago however helped create London's current nightmare – much housing need, little spare land in which to meet it. The problem is at its most acute on both sides of our National Nature Reserve.

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Graham M Lomas
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