

## **The first 50 years – and the next 50 Chairman's Letter, Spring 2011**

In the history of the Friends published to mark our anniversary, three themes dominate the first 50 years.

The first is simply establishing the group, providing services for members (including a first newsletter in 1963) and building its influence on decisions about the Park.

The second is combating urbanisation of the Park, whether it was pushing in the 1960s for the removal of the military camp near Kingston Gate (used as athletes' accommodation for the 1948 Olympics) or lobbying to stop Pembroke Lodge being sold for private development in the 1990s.

The third is traffic. The Friends was founded to fight against moves to bring Park roads into the national road network (there were plans for dual carriageways through the Park!) and campaigned about traffic throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Friends were completely divided on traffic, internally and from the public, and almost fell apart.

What will be the themes of the next 50 years? I think the first will be the increasing visitor numbers and increasing intensity of how they use the Park. Quiet enjoyment of the Park is being replaced by running, cycling, kiting, dog walking, playing informal games and so on – all high impact activities for the ecology. If your concern is public access these are good things; if, like the Friends, your concern is for balancing that with conserving the Park, they are problems.

The second is the decline in public funding for the Royal Parks. In 1961 it was 95% of income, now it is below 50%; by 2061 it could well be zero. The difference will be made up partly by philanthropy but mainly by commercial income: concerts, restaurants, shops, sports, toll or parking charges – take your pick.

The third is changes in the Park's ecology and wildlife. In the last 50 years, the Park has lost the Brown Hare, Hedgehog, Water Shrew, and breeding Pheasants, Grey Partridge, Woodlark, Tree Pipit, Redstart, House and Tree Sparrow, Linnets, Bullfinch and Yellowhammer. We need to prevent the same loss in the next 50 years – in fact we need to reverse it. At the same time climate change will favour some species and penalise others, and cause new diseases to fauna and flora.

Park management has the main responsibility for dealing with these threats, but the Friends has an important role to play in lobbying and public education about use of the Park, resisting commercialisation where it affects the Park's ecology and its unique character, stimulating local philanthropy, and contributing volunteers and funding to conservation projects.

Over the next 50 years, our aim will be the same as it has been since 1961 – protecting and conserving the Park for future generations.

