

NATURE

Keeping water in the Park

by Alison Donaldson

When you walk in the Park, you may think a ditch is a ditch and a pond is just a pond. In fact, these are key features of the Park that need to be properly managed. In early January, Piers Eley and I met at Pembroke Lodge and went for a walk in the rather boggy area near White Ash Lodge. The story that Piers told me provides a new perspective on the matter of water in the Park.



A few years ago, after a spate of dry summers, Piers started to notice that the tops of oaks and chestnuts were dying back. He also knew that oaks are sensitive to changes in the deep water table and that, when the ground is dry and there is a heavy rain, water tends to “bounce off” the ground and pour out of the Park. He put two and two together and concluded that it would be important to find ways of keeping some of this water in the Park.

Around the same time, he was invited to become a trustee of the Richmond Park Charitable Trust, and in that capacity he found an opportunity to talk to the Park management about the problem. He learned that Mike Fitt, now Deputy Chief Executive of the Royal Parks and formerly Superintendent of Richmond Park, had already decided that the network of Victorian drains just beneath the surface of the Park should not always be repaired. In some cases it would be more beneficial to the environment of the Park to encourage the spread of boggy areas where drains had collapsed. The irony is that the Victorians took considerable trouble to drain boggy areas of the Park, presumably because they thought this would make it more suitable for walking.

Following these discussions, in 2004 Simon Richards, the current Park Manager, went even further by starting to open up some of the drains, thus creating open ditches like the one pictured. Almost immediately, some quite rare plants started to grow in the new ditches, such as Bristle Club Rush (*Isolepis setacea*) and Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*), two tiny members of the Rush family, and Trailing St John’s Wort (*Hypericum humifusum*), another tiny plant which has attractive yellow flowers.

Piers also suggested creating some ponds, connected to the ditches, to encourage water to drain down through the sandy soil into the gravel. We



looked at two small ponds or “scrapes” created in 2004. The one pictured here is known as Marsh Pond.

These kinds of water-conserving measures will be increasingly important as we move into a new era of global warming, with weather extremes endangering the Park and its vegetation. So far the

measures have been concentrated on the existing streams and ditches, but Piers’s latest idea is to look for suitable locations for new ditches and soak-away ponds around and just below the brows of the main hills, as a way to capture more of the water run-off and retain this for the future benefit of the Park

Meanwhile, the new ditches and ponds add to the Park’s bio-diversity and are useful reminders that it is a man-managed environment and that we have a responsibility to preserve it for future generations.

Piers Eley is Chairman of the Richmond Park Wildlife Group. He originally studied law, and worked as a corporate financier for 30 years, but his great love is wildlife and the Park.