

The magazine of the Friends of Richmond Park

Spring/summer 2025

# Park Life

In Richmond's National Nature Reserve

**Royal Parks police – the end of an era**

**Exploring the Park's ponds**

**The challenge of Acute Oak Decline**



# The Friends of Richmond Park thanks its sponsor for their generous support



## Look out for...

The lovely lilac-coloured flowers of heath speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*) bloom from May to August and are usually at their best in June and July. It's also known as gypsyweed and was once used in traditional medicine as a cough remedy and a salve.

It's an indicator species of acid grasslands and can be found on raised ground or anthills as well as more open grassland, often alongside the more common germander speedwell. Heathlands and dry acid grassland are amongst some of the most endangered

habitats in the UK. Regular checks on the important indicator species in Richmond Park help us assess the health of our acid grasslands.



## Contents

### **News**

- 4 Pen Ponds works completed
- 6 Acute Oak Decline afflicts Park's oaks
- 8 Isabella bog garden
- 16 A return to Richmond Park
- 16 A new look for Petersham playground
- 17 ZSL project update
- 17 Let sleeping logs lie

### **Features**

- 6 End of an era for Royal Parks police
- 8 A lifetime in Richmond Park
- 12 Focus on... Prince Charles Spinney
- 14 Exploring the Park's ponds
- 18 The Holly Lodge Centre – a very special place

### **Friends**

- 3 From the Chairman
- 4 Friends welcome new Patron
- 20 Friends of Richmond Park Discovers

*Cover and back photographs by Amanda Boardman @mandsby*

*The cover photograph is also available from the Visitor Centre as a postcard*

# From the Chairman

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## Patrons, Officers, Trustees & Vice-Presidents of the Friends

**Patrons:** Sir David Attenborough, Clare Balding, Annabel Croft, Baroness Kramer of Richmond Park

**Chairman:** Roger Hillyer

**Secretary:** Judith Pearson

**Treasurer:** Hugh Deighton

**Other trustees:** Peter Allnutt, Janet Bostock, Neil Brereton, Nick Coleman, Helene Feger, Vivienne Press, Monique Sarkany, Nigel Sherwin

**Vice-Presidents:** Ron Crompton, Richard Gray, Richard Polson



# Friends welcome new Patron

**We are delighted that Annabel Croft has joined Sir David Attenborough, Clare Balding and Baroness Kramer as a patron of The Friends of Richmond Park.**

“Richmond Park is my favourite place in the world” Annabel Croft told me when we first met, adding that she was honoured to become a patron of the Friends of Richmond Park.

Annabel is a former British Number 1 tennis player who at 15 was the youngest British player to play in the Wimbledon main draw for 100 years. After retirement from tennis, she developed a career in broadcasting focused on tennis commentary. In the last two years she has conducted the on court interviews after the Wimbledon singles finals.

This busy life involves much travel. But when at home near Kingston where she has lived for 25 years, she treasures what she calls her “Richmond Park fix” – her almost daily walks or runs in the Park. It’s more than the walking and running – Annabel finds the wildlife and deer fascinating, she could watch them all day.

***“Richmond Park is my favourite place in the world”***

Two years ago, her husband Mel Coleman, died shortly after a diagnosis of cancer. They had found solace with a daily walk in Richmond Park, savouring the view over Pen Ponds. Later that year Annabel took part in Strictly Come Dancing. In a memorable and moving programme she showed her dance partner the places in Richmond Park she had shared with Mel.



As her introduction to the Friends, we invited Annabel to plant two trees near Sheen Wood to recognise the Friends’ recent donation of trees. She set about the task with gusto, enjoying climbing into the tree crate to complete the task.

“Richmond Park is very close to my heart, having spent so many happy times there.” Annabel said “I am delighted to be able to help Friends of Richmond Park continue their work to preserve and protect this precious jewel in the crown of our community.”

We look forward to working with Annabel in her role as a patron.

*Words and photo by Roger Hillyer, chair of the Friends of Richmond Park*



# Pen Ponds works completed

In February the major engineering works on Pen Ponds causeway were finally completed after eight months, the unsightly equipment removed and the causeway returned to normal. Well, almost normal.

Pen Ponds is officially a reservoir - the causeway is a dam controlling the water that collects from west of the ponds and preventing it flooding Sheen and Barnes downhill in extreme conditions. The excavation work to strengthen it revealed serious erosion in the culvert that carries the water from the Upper to the Lower Pond.

The repair work required draining the Upper Pond, for the first time since the Second World War when it was drained to prevent enemy aircraft using it for navigation.

Park staff and volunteers carefully transferred the fish, including 50 carp and pike and hundreds of smaller fish from Upper to Lower Pond. Then Friends volunteers and Rangers removed (less carefully!) the 80 years of debris lying

on the mud, which included over 600 assorted balls (mainly dog toys), 100 bottles, one and a half bin bags of broken glass, a stirrup and a baby doll's head.

The Upper Pond water level is now returning to normal naturally and the fish are being returned (the debris will not be returned!). It will take a while for the causeway and its wildlife habitats to settle and some further work is being left until that has happened.

As well as being debris free and having cleaner water, the new 'normal' does have one large difference to the old. Park staff took the opportunity of the Upper Pond's drainage to extend the reedbeds at the west end of the Upper Pond. Bundles of hazel were laid as a base and reeds planted in them. A new stone wall keeps the silt in and the deer out. The extension doubles the size the size of this priority habitat for birds and invertebrates and is a very valuable addition to the biodiversity of the Park.

*By Ron Crompton. Ron is a trustee of FRP*

*Photo of the reed bed extension in Pen Ponds by The Royal Parks*



# End of an era for Royal Parks police



**With the decision of the Met to disband the Royal Parks Operational Command Unit, which will remove dedicated officers from all the Royal Parks and redeploy them in the relevant boroughs, Park Life looks back at the history of policing in Richmond Park.**

Historically, crimes such as theft, robbery and assault have been rare within the Park. The stealing of deer or venison did occur, as did the illegal hunting of hares, pheasants and partridges. In one recorded incident in July 1735, a labourer called Ralph Cheshire was seen by a Park employee to knock down a turkey and try to conceal it in his apron. When caught, Cheshire threw the bird into the ferns. He was prosecuted, but his sentence is not recorded. (Turkeys were a feature of the Park for a few years when George II thought it appropriate to hunt them.)

In April 1854 Anne Murray, Duchess of Atholl, a Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Victoria, was robbed of her watch and chain and a ring by a youth armed with a pistol. She had been walking towards Kingston Gate from Sheen Lodge, having previously lunched with Lord John and Lady Russell at Pembroke Lodge. There is no record of the robber being apprehended.

That high-profile robbery resulted in the establishment of a police force for the Park made up of four uniformed constables; the five existing gatekeepers were also kitted out in constables' uniforms, although they did not have a constable's powers.

It was not until the passing of the Parks Regulation Act, 1872 that the policing of the Royal Parks was formalised. The Act provided that *'every park-keeper... shall, within the limits of the park of which he is keeper, have all such powers, privileges, and immunities, and be liable to all*

*such duties and responsibilities, as any police constable has within the police district in which such park is situated'.*

It appears that there was still some problem with night-time crime, however, as the gatekeepers would not be on duty and the Met were unwilling to patrol such a large area throughout the night.

Even though the keepers could act as constables within the Park, it was only in 1974 that the Parks Regulation (Amendment) Act provided that park keepers were to be referred to as constables and that every such officer would be attested as a constable by making a declaration before a justice of the peace. And so the Royal Parks Constabulary (RPC), came into being.

Unlike other police forces, it was not under Home Office control. It was headed by a Superintendent and had dog, motorcycle and mounted sections. By 1978 it had an establishment of 179 and an actual strength of 165 covering all the royal parks.

Following a review in 1992, the force was moved from the Royal Parks Agency to the

Met. So after 30 years of existence, what had been the Royal Parks Constabulary became an Operational Command Unit of the Met on 1 April 2004. Out of a total of 131 officers, 15 or 16 were assigned to Richmond Park – a steep reduction from the position in 1992 when the complement for Richmond Park had been 45 officers and staff.

By 2019 the numbers had fallen even further, with eight officers having to cover both Richmond and Bushy Parks – at a time when visitor numbers had more than quadrupled.



Despite some break-ins and robberies (notably violent thefts of bicycles) in recent years, Richmond Park is perceived as being relatively safe. This is a tribute to the current team, the successors of more than 150 years of a dedicated police unit in Richmond Park.



*The Parks Police taking part in a Discoverers Day event at Holly Lodge last year*

*By Max Lankester. Max is a member of FRP*

*Photo of the gatekeeper at Kingston Gate is from a postcard in the Hearsum Collection, probably from 1913.*



# A lifetime in Richmond Park

## **Nigel Jackman talks to a former Park police officer who's spent most of his life living in the Park.**

John Pledger and his wife Liz have lived in Richmond Park since September 1963, thought to be the longest residency ever recorded, with the exception of Princess Alexandra.

He was born in September 1938 and brought up on a Hertfordshire farm, where he developed his lifelong love of horses.

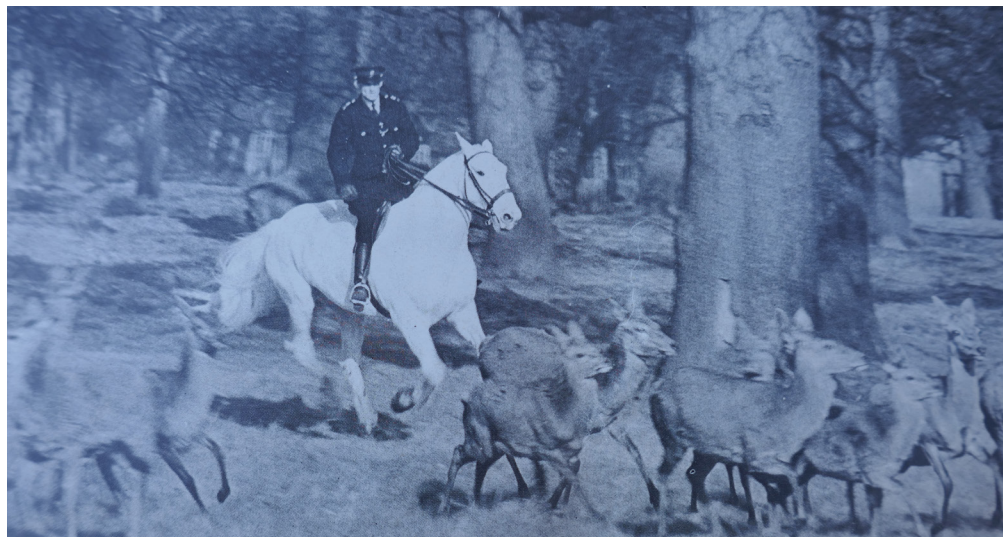
On being demobbed from national service, he was interviewed for a post in policing with the Royal Parks mounted rangers. He began work four days later, firstly at Bushy Park and Hampton Court before moving to Richmond Park as one of a team of three. With promotion to sergeant came a home in the Park for the next 52 years, though his career with the police ended in 1980. He retired on health grounds

partly attributable to a horse fall. But that didn't end his relationship with horses.

He kept them at the eight stables at White Ash Lodge during his tenancy and bred 21 foals there. For a time in the 1970s he kept a flat racer and a hurdler at Thatched House Lodge, running them (unsuccessfully) at Lingfield, Windsor and Kempton Park.

In 1980 he started a livery yard for five horses at Park Road and ran it for ten years. Stables were installed at Robin Hood Gate Lodge when he moved there in 2015 and to this day he keeps three horses.

As a mounted ranger with the Royal Parks, John would occasionally encounter the rich and famous. Once, he came across Sammy Davies Jnr with his bodyguard, spread out on a blanket and drinking wine, with his Roll Royce parked in a no-parking area. After a pleasant conversation, John advised the celebrity not to be there when he returned.



*John Pledger on his horse Cardinal helps with the round-up of the deer from the Illustrated London News 1967*

Then there was Winston Churchill whose driver would regularly park on the hill at White Lodge, allowing the great man to recline in a deckchair with newspaper and cigar in hand. He and John would acknowledge one another; similarly, when Prince Philip was playing polo in the park.

For a time in the 1960s the Park was so busy with visitors that herds of fallow deer would seek refuge in his garden at White Ash Lodge. Come the evening, John would proclaim with a loudhailer that the Park was closing, and the deer would respond by dutifully leaving through the garden gate.

While still a ranger, John helped with a range of duties in the Park from feeding the deer in winter to rounding them up on

***As a mounted ranger with the Royal Parks, John would encounter the rich and famous – from Sammy Davies Jnr to Winston Churchill***

horseback during the cull – a practice that only stopped a decade after his retirement.

John fondly remembers the Richmond Park Horse Show held on the polo field (now the rugby pitches). When the show finished, mounted on a big grey called Cardinal, he would lead a procession of horses and hackney carriages through the Park and out through Ham Gate.

“I’m a country boy so I know a lot about nature and wildlife”, says John and living in the Park allowed him to get close to the wildlife. He had a kestrel feed from his kitchen for several years. When a young hind with a badly infected fetlock appeared at Thatched House Lodge stables, John gained its confidence and nursed it back to health. Each year it was dye-marked to escape the cull and lived to be one of the oldest deer in the Park.

The Park has become too ‘managed’ in John’s mind, an inevitable change given the huge rise in visitors, dogs, cars and cyclists over the years. He particularly regrets the loss of the Park’s hares, last seen in the Isabella Plantation and near the ballet school.

Of the Park itself, John says “When I first arrived, I was told it would not be changed and would retain its natural state, but over the years it has been commercialised and modernised and is a different place to what it was”.



*John on one of his horses in 2023*

However, Richmond Park has been his life, and his love for it remains strong.

After almost 62 years living in in the Park, he regards himself with some justification as ‘the last man standing’.

*By Nigel Jackman.*

*Photos courtesy of John Pledger*

# Acute Oak Decline afflicts Park's oak trees

With increasing visitor numbers, climate change, and new pests and diseases, Richmond Park's trees face growing threats. One of them for oak trees is Acute Oak Decline.

AOD is a complex disease which can be catastrophic, potentially killing trees within 3-8 years (some do survive). It's become more wide-spread in the last 20 years.

AOD-affected trees can be identified from dark, vertical, weeping fissures in the bark (known as stem bleeds) which seep black fluid through vertical cracks down the trunks. Over time, the number and severity of cracks increases, the tree canopy thins and ultimately the tree can die.

Research has shown that AOD symptoms are accompanied by the presence of specific bacteria in combination with the oak jewel beetle. It appears this interaction between the beetle and bacteria causes the bacteria to become pathogenic to tree tissue. This impacts the tree's vascular system and results in the flow of water and essential nutrients being interrupted, leading to a deterioration in condition and sometimes tree death.

As nearly half of the Park's trees are oak species – mostly English oak (*Quercus*

robur) – research and positive intervention are essential. Over the last 15 years, The Royal Parks have been working with Forest Research, the UK's principal organisation for forestry and tree-related research.

The research has found that the impacts of climate change (particularly drought), compaction and poor soil quality are key



*Stem bleed in the tree's bark*

risk factors. They contribute to low oxygen levels in the soil, nutrient imbalance, the inability of the tree to tolerate stress and a greater susceptibility to serious pathogens and disease, such as AOD.

As a result, The Royal Parks are facilitating research investigating methods of soil decompaction. This is taking place at different sites in the Park using both forks and a mechanical soil aeration probe.

It's hoped that the improved soil conditions will enable the oaks to be healthier, more effectively combatting the disease-inducing bacteria and mitigating AOD.



*By Richard Gray. Richard is a member of FRP*

*Photo shows Sheen Wood whose oaks have been badly affected by AOD*



# Renewal of the Bog Garden



**I**t's been a busy winter in the Bog Garden, a man-made area in the Isabella Plantation.

Thanks to a system of pumps and channels, fed with water from Pen Ponds, the Bog Garden has a running stream which feeds five ponds. These had become silted and the planting needed some attention. With the emptying of the Pen Ponds, stopping the flow of water, it was the perfect opportunity to carry out this work.

First of all the perennial plants were lifted in the autumn. Major work then started in January when a specialist firm of contractors came to desilt the ponds. Once desilted, deep channels were re-dug and the original plastic layer that held their banks was replaced with hessian. The log waterfalls were renewed and the depleted soil layers were renovated.

In March, the second phase began: the paths were resurfaced and new metal edging added. New stepping stones were created from oak trees felled in the Isabella Plantation, bridges were renovated and the decking replaced.

Created as a Millenium Project in 2000,

the design of the Bog Garden remains unchanged as is the planting.

Back in 2000, the planting included a mixture of exotic plants and native plants which are good for the local wildlife. But over time, shorter and weaker perennials were outcompeted by stronger taller ones. The balance between overpowering native plants such as purple loosestrife, meadowsweet and Joe-Pye-weed versus exotics needed to be restored.

New Head Gardener Selina Tan has been involved from the start with this new and challenging project. She will soon lead the replanting under Jo Scrivener's expert guidance. They are both excited at the prospect of seeing the Bog Garden renewed.



*The restored stepping stones*

While visiting the garden with Jo, a prospecting newt appeared in an area soon to be replanted with marginal plants. We took it as a sign of approval!

*Words and photos by Monique Sarkany. Monique is a trustee of FRP*

## Focus on... Prince Charles Spinney



### **This is the first of a new series in Park Life, exploring the history and ecology of one particular area of the Park.**

Prince Charles Spinney is one of a number of enclosed woodland areas in the Park, created in 1949 and named in honour of Prince Charles who was born the previous year. The fencing protects the woodland from the deer, preserving a natural habitat.

What was there before the area was enclosed? It was open grassland with scattered oaks known as wood pasture. Many years before it was probably woodland with an understorey of shrub and the still present bluebells which like to grow in the light shade of woodland.

In the 1850s the area now called Broomfield Hill was known by locals as Bloom field Hill, most likely due to the presence of bluebells rather than broom. I cannot find out why the name changed but it is unlikely broom grew well on this site.

When the 12-acre spinney was created there were already oaks on the site, several of which are now veterans. An “eclectic” mix of trees both native and non-native was planted which can still be seen today as you walk through the driftway (public footpath). There is robinia, bamboo, cherry, hornbeam, whitebeam and a Handkerchief tree at the top gate, several Scots pines, larch and a horse chestnut which was planted later.

The north (lower) end of the driftway is a good place to see bluebells this year as the Friends volunteers have cleared back the bramble. Most are native bluebells although sadly some hybrids with the Spanish bluebell may be present.

In 2008 it was decided to recreate a hazel understorey in the northern part of the spinney which would improve the habitat for birds and other wildlife. Mostly hazel but also some hawthorn, alder, cherry, field maple and oak were planted. The area was



then left alone with silver birch self-seeding and growing vigorously, shading the hazel. Bramble has flourished, overwhelming and often pulling down the hazel. The bluebells are still there but were hidden.

Move on to 2024 and the Friends conservation volunteers were asked to remove the many plastic tubes from the hazel. Often the trees had grown into the tubes which made removal difficult. Many were empty where the young trees had died. Our next task was to cut back the birch to open up the area, giving much needed light to the remaining hazel.

The logs have been left in piles to rot down as they then “feed the forest” as their nutrients return to the soil. Bramble has also been cut back and new hazel whips have been planted in gaps where the original plantings had failed. Spindle and hawthorn have been planted along the fence as they prefer the light on the woodland edge. Goat willow has been planted along a ditch running through the area.

Bluebells were appearing in February and should now be visible when they bloom through the fence along the north side of the spinney.



*Friends conservation volunteers working in the Spinney last winter*



*Prince Charles Spinney in 1949 before its enclosure*

Future maintenance will be needed as both birch and bramble are vigorous and will regrow. There is also some bracken to be controlled. Coppicing of the hazel on a rotational basis will provide hazel sticks for use in the park. This and maintenance will be future jobs for the conservation volunteers!

**Editor's note:** The word spinney refers to a small group of trees or a small wood. It comes from the old French word *espinei* which means “place where thorn trees grow”. It's been in use in English since late medieval times.

*By Janet Bostock. Janet is a trustee of FRP and runs the conservation volunteers*

*The main photo shows the driftway through the Spinney cleared of birch and brambles by the volunteers*



# Exploring the ponds of Richmond Park

**W**ater is the lifeblood of Richmond Park. Don't take my word for it – that's the view of Sir David Attenborough in the Friends' film about the Park. Without it there would be no veteran trees, no acid grassland, no fungi and therefore no birds, bats, butterflies or deer.

Ponds play a large role in that lifeblood. Deer and other animals drink from them, waterfowl and dragonflies live on them and they retain water to combat increasingly dry summers and heavier winter rainfall. They also contribute to the tranquillity that visitors value so much.

There are 20 ponds in the Park and another 10-15 scrapes (shallow indentations in the ground that collect water). A ridge runs from Richmond Gate to the plateau above Kingston Gate, forming a watershed. As the map shows, most ponds are on its broader, gently sloping east side, draining water into Beverley Brook and thence into the Thames at Barnes. Just a few are on the on its narrower, steeper west side it, draining into the Sudbrook and on to the Thames at Ham.

By far the largest are Pen Ponds (Upper and Lower). Originally a trench dug to drain the boggy land to the west,



*Martin's Pond, one of Ron's favourites*

they then were turned into gravel pits for local building. They had been made into proper ponds by the mid 18th century. Today Pen Ponds are both an official reservoir and a wildlife sanctuary, loved by migrating birds.

It's difficult to say which is the oldest pond in the Park. Many of them were originally natural, so have been there in some form for centuries. By the mid 18th century, maps show Leg of Mutton, Adam's, Dann's, Ham and Spankers Hill ponds, in addition to Pen Ponds. Half the present ponds were created in the mid 19th century as part of a programme of draining the widespread boggy areas to give improved public access and better waterholes for deer. Since then, only a handful of new ponds have been created – Thomson's (in the 1950s when Isabella Plantation was being developed) and the recent Jubilee (2012) and Attenborough (2014), both initiated and funded by the Friends.

What about their names? There's no overall rhyme or reason for them. Some take their name from previous Park staff (eg Bishop's, Thomson's), some for nearby natural features (eg Barn Wood, White Ash) and others for a ragbag of other reasons, such as Gallows (on the site of the Kingston Assizes gallows) or Leg of Mutton (its shape). The Pen Ponds probably take their name from a deer pen, not from the (more romantic) medieval word for a female swan.

The strangest pond is probably Bishop's. For years it was fed mainly by leaks from the mains water pipe to Holly Lodge. When that leak was repaired, it became a seasonal pond, full in winter



*The northern part of Richmond Park showing its ponds, streams and ditches*

and dry in summer. Its main rival is the ephemeral pond near Roehampton Gate, which for many years appeared after heavy rain and then disappeared again. Improvements to the drainage of the surrounding land into Beverley Brook has now disappeared it entirely.

Several are particularly important for wildlife. Dann's is a habitat for the protected Great Crested Newt and so not open to the public. The pond at Ham Gate is a rich habitat for dragon- and damselflies, with restricted access for the public. Upper Pen Ponds is important for migrating birds, the sand martin and kingfisher nest banks and its reedbeds. The deer also use it to access the fenced plantation on its banks for birthing.

Climate change and increasing visitor numbers are driving further change. Invasive weeds such as crassula have

become a big threat and are difficult to eradicate. People and their dogs have had a big impact, destroying marginal vegetation, disturbing the water, worsening silting and discouraging wildlife. As a result, some ponds have been fenced to protect them – for example Ham Gate, Adam's and most recently Attenborough.

Which is the best pond? I have two favourites. First Martin's Pond, between Pen Ponds car park and Robin Hood Gate, which in spring and summer with the willows overhanging the water, is very pretty. Second is Conduit Wood, recently restored and hidden among the trees. It's idyllic.

*By Ron Crompton. Ron is a trustee of FRP*

*Map of Richmond Park's water courses is courtesy of The Royal Parks*

## A return to Richmond Park

**S**elina Tan returned to Richmond Park last summer as Head Gardener, Isabella Plantation. It's a varied role – from ensuring there are enough gloves for the team and the volunteers to thinking about what trees to plant for the next 50 years.

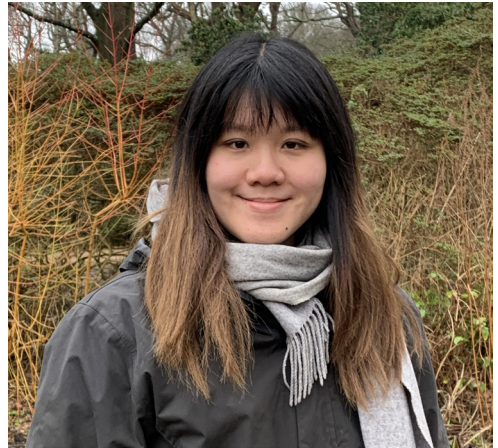
She places great importance on ensuring her team feel supported so that they can perform their jobs to the best of their abilities. She finds if she can manage that, then the care and hardwork naturally results in a beautiful garden for the public to enjoy.

Selina previously worked for three years at Richmond Park until 2021, undertaking her horticultural apprenticeship. She then spent three years at Kew completing the Kew Diploma in Horticulture.

Her current focus is bringing the plants back to a more considered appearance. Some areas have become quite wild and overgrown and she wants to get the brambles under control to really show off the plant collection. Longer

term, she is constantly thinking about how to futureproof the garden and ensure that the collection survives in an ever-changing climate.

One of her favourite aspects of the job is seeing how the Park changes throughout the seasons and learning about the different trees and plants. She says it's a great place to work – with the Isabella Plantation as her office!



## New look for Petersham playground

**P**etersham playground has undergone major restoration over the winter months – its first for more than 20 years. The playground has been completely re-built with new paths, new seating and new planting schemes based on plants found in the Park.

Among the innovations are a set of timber huts and a natural log tunnel.

The Royal Parks carried out a consultation process before the work

began. It's hoped the new playground will improve the connection children have with the natural environment by including features like bird boxes and bug hotels and by using natural materials for the play equipment.

It opened in April.



# Let sleeping logs lie

Many of us will remember the fun in building dens in woodland. And you can see dens built from fallen logs all over the Park. But sadly what's fun for children is bad news for the Park's ecology.

When branches are piled up against a tree to make a den, the wood soon dries out. So the moss, fungi and insects which inhabit the damp, rotting wood die as they need the water in wet wood lying on the ground to survive. You only have to lift a fallen log to see all the life teeming underneath it. (But be sure to replace the log in the same place).

It's not only woodlice, centipedes and beetles which benefit when wood is left to rot on the ground. As fallen wood rots and breaks down, its nutrients are



*Deconstructing a den*

returned to the soil which fertilises the woodland. Fallen wood is left lying on the ground for a reason. The Royal Parks are now asking let's leave it there.

## Park wildlife survey – how to volunteer

Around 600,000 images were downloaded from the 150 cameras deployed across Richmond Park by Friends volunteers in April 2024. Using an AI tool, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) have now removed any images which include humans or are blank, leaving around 200,000 images to be reviewed and wildlife species to be identified.

The next phase is a citizen science project to view and find all the wildlife species present in the images. All members are invited to take part.

The project is hosted on a software platform called “Zooniverse” which has been developed by ZSL and the

Friends, who have funded the project and provided volunteers, with support from The Royal Parks. It's part of a wider project by ZSL, called London Hogwatch, to monitor wildlife activity across the whole of London.

To take part go the Friends of Richmond Park website:  
[www.frp.org.uk/richmond-park-wildlife-survey](http://www.frp.org.uk/richmond-park-wildlife-survey)

When all the images have been reviewed and classified, the Friends will be working with ZSL to compile a report about wildlife activity in the Park and compare it with ZSL's findings from other similar surveys across London.

# The Holly Lodge Centre – a special place

Imagine a little boy, around nine years old. He's nervous when out of a familiar environment. Sudden noises or bright lights upset him, too many people disturb him. He can't describe how he's feeling or why he's upset because he is non-verbal. It's coming up to Christmas and he's been brought to The Holly Lodge Centre for an afternoon of activities but he's too scared to participate. He has autism and is one of the many children with neuro-diversity or learning disabilities who the Holly Lodge Centre team entertain, teach, care for and love.



If you visit the Park regularly you may have wondered what was behind the walls at Holly Lodge. I thought I had a good idea of what happened there until I met Alex Sharp who with boundless enthusiasm told me about their amazing role in the community. It's a small team – she and her co-manager, Jaime Walsh, job-share the manager role working with one full time and three part time education co-ordinators.

They host sessions for mainstream schools across the area. But about half of their visits are from special schools or groups such as Paddock School and

Strathmore School which specialise in teaching children with severe learning difficulties, and Skylarks, an independent local charity supporting children and young people with special needs.

Fiona Morgan from Skylarks enthused about the range of activities that The Holly Lodge Centre arrange from bubble-blowing to birdsong to circus skills. The activities allow the children to learn new skills and have fun while their parents can relax – it's therapeutic for them too. "It was so lovely to be out in the fresh air in a safe environment" and "it was so great to see my children so happy and engaged" are typical comments.

But don't imagine that the team limit themselves to children. They also work with RUILS, a charity helping to aid independent living for people with dementia, FISH which is based in Barnes and provides help and support for older people, and independent care homes.

So what do the Holly Lodge team provide? Many of the activities are based outside in the nature trail where groups can safely enjoy sensory activities. There's pond dipping in a wheelchair-



friendly raised pool, and “log rolling” where you can lift logs and examine the wildlife beneath. There’s gardening and workshops on plants, birds, invertebrates, habitats – the programme on offer is flexible and can be adapted according to the needs of the group.



In fact, flexibility is the key when dealing with people with such individual and specific needs. Alex told me of one autistic child who simply wouldn’t get off the bus, let alone enter the centre. Nothing could persuade him and he faced being left on the bus with a carer until the session finished. Well if Mohammed won’t go to the mountain... so Alex packed up a bag of activities and took them to this little boy on the bus so he could enjoy his afternoon in a place where he felt safe and comfortable.

Indoor activities include an art group, a Victorian classroom and an amazing Victorian pharmacy (which was a working pharmacy in Sheen Lane until a few years ago) where groups can do things like making soap or even lemonade (not mixed, thankfully...).

None of this would be possible without The Holly Lodge Centre’s 75 highly

dedicated, trained volunteers; some have been giving their time for years (one for 30 years). Funding is also essential. The Holly Lodge Centre is a registered charity and receives grants from The Royal Parks and other grant-giving trusts and organisations. About a third of the funding comes from visiting school and community groups and a further third is raised by events such as the annual quiz, concerts and cheese and wine-tasting.

And what about the little boy at the beginning of our story? Slowly and gently he was coaxed first of all to watch and then tentatively approach the Christmas tree that the children were decorating. Little by little he got closer, started to touch the tinsel, finally throwing it in the air, smiling and laughing with delight.



*The Holly Lodge Centre is currently looking for more volunteers to join its education team, particularly those willing to step into the role of Mrs Sawyer, the strict Victorian teacher! This role might suit retired teachers or actors. Please get in contact to find out more.*

*You can donate to The Holly Lodge Centre via their website*

[thehollylodgecentre.org.uk](http://thehollylodgecentre.org.uk).

*By Alison Glasier*

*Photos courtesy of The Holly Lodge Centre*



# Friends of Richmond Park Discoverers



*We're going on a treasure hunt...*

**W**inter is a good time to focus on birds since there are no leaves on the trees so they are more visible. With education in mind, we decided to look at feathers, how specialised they can be (e.g. for warmth, for flight, for display) and how good they are at keeping birds warm in winter.

On a Sunday in mid-February we held our half-term event at Pembroke Lodge, hosted again by the Hearsam Collection. In previous winters, we've held events outside, braving the wet and cold. But it's always preferable to be in the warm. Happily for us, it was a sunny day and we had a good crowd who turned up to enjoy what we had prepared for them.

Members of the Twickenham-Richmond RSPB group joined us to provide their expertise. Birdwatchers came along with their telescopes and children were able to look through with them and identify those birds who were good enough to

remain still for a few moments! The birdwatchers also produced a check list for the day: 18 species were spotted, not bad for a two-hour session. There were short walks for those who wanted to go outside where a friendly wren and a busy blackbird allowed for some close-up observation along a path.

Meanwhile indoors, Discoverers were focusing on some art and science. On the experiment table, they had one question to answer: "Which is the best insulator: wool, feathers or bubble-wrap?" By plotting a temperature curve of warming ice-cold water from beakers which were wrapped up one of these of these materials, they were able to identify the winner: feathers. Sorry sheep!

We looked at feathers through our new portable microscope. It has no eye piece but a mini screen instead so it is much easier for children to use, without losing the wow factor. Viewing the world of the invisible with the naked eye is always amazing for children and adults alike.



*Writing with a quill - how did Shakespeare do it?*

We also had a 'whose feather is it?' quiz with feathers from little owls, great woodpeckers, parakeets. It wasn't easy but Discoverers love a challenge.



Sam and Sophie, our two artists and volunteers, led the art activity to make or draw a feather. It was very popular and Discoverers – as always – rose to the challenge of creating their own observational drawing with beautiful results.

‘Paint a small bairdbath’ was a busy table and we hope that our local bird population will be all the healthier for it. Keeping their feathers clean by bathing is key to bird survival in winter as dirty, matted feathers cannot insulate properly and hypothermia can set in.

Our most challenging activity was led by Pat who invited everyone to have a go at writing with a quill. To give it that authentic feeling, we had a writing slope and a copy of Shakespeare’s Complete Works. He really did write it all with a quill and anyone who tried can attest: it is not easy!

So, all in all, a fun and educational session with something for everyone.

Our monthly first Sunday of the Month Nature Walks for Discoverers-registered families are going well. A little group of regulars attend our morning stroll in the Park and we discover anything that piques our interest.

Recently, one little Discoverer brought a map that she had made herself and it turned out it was a map ‘to find treasure’. That was a lot of fun and one of our dads had the brilliant idea of hiding some treasure (a few mini eggs) around an old log. I was amazed and asked if we could check the map but my request was politely dismissed. I had clearly missed the point: the treasure had been found and eaten!

*If you’d like to take part in any of the Discoverers events, they are all free. You can join the mailing list by emailing [discoverers@frp.org.uk](mailto:discoverers@frp.org.uk)*

*Words and photos by Monique Sarkany. Monique is a trustee of FRP and runs the Discoverers programme*

*Special thanks to the Hearsun Collection for hosting the Discoverers at Pembroke Lodge*

# Friends Information

## Friends' Walks

*All are welcome to come on these free guided walks. Each walk lasts about two hours and starts from one of the car parks at 10 am on the first Saturday of each month.*

***Dogs must be kept on leads during all walks.***

*We show the gates that those arriving by motor vehicle will need to come through.*

*If you need more information or special support or help with the walk, please phone Ian McKenzie on 020 8943 0632 or you can email him at [walks@frp.org.uk](mailto:walks@frp.org.uk) in advance. Or phone 07340 766573 on the day.*

June 7th	Pen Ponds car park (vehicle access via Roehampton Gate)
July 5th	Robin Hood Gate car park (vehicle access via Roehampton Gate)
August 2nd	Kingston Gate car park (vehicle access via Kingston, Ham or Richmond Gates)
September 6th	Roehampton Gate car park (vehicle access via Roehampton Gate)
October 4th	Sheen Gate car park + Deer + Walk-the-Wall* (vehicle access via Sheen Gate)
November 1st	Pembroke Lodge car park + Fungi (vehicle access via Kingston, Ham or Richmond Gates)
December 6th	Pen Ponds car park (vehicle access via Roehampton Gate)

*\* The Walk-the-Wall option is a 7.5 mile (12 km) walk that takes three to three and a half hours. It covers a circular route along the wall/fences that encloses the public access areas of Richmond Park, excluding the golf courses. There is one steep hill with the remaining route on the flat or gentle slopes.*

## Magazine People

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## Enquiries

**Friends:** see [www.frp.org.uk](http://www.frp.org.uk).

If your query is not answered here,  
please email [secretary@frp.org.uk](mailto:secretary@frp.org.uk)

**Park management:**

[richmond@royalpark.org.uk](mailto:richmond@royalpark.org.uk)

**Police non-emergency:** Phone 101



# Friends Information

## The Friends – Who we are and What we do

The Friends of Richmond Park is a charity founded in 1961 and dedicated to the conservation and protection of Richmond Park, its peace and natural beauty for the benefit of the public and future generations.

The Friends fund conservation and interpretation projects, organise the Discoverers programme for families, monitor events in the Park, and offer guided walks.

Our more than 300 volunteers staff the Visitor Centre, carry out conservation work and pick litter as

part of our Adopt-an- Area scheme.

We lobby and campaign on issues such as the ecology and wildlife of the Park, policing, car access to the Park, cycling, flight paths and local planning issues.

We also publish books, leaflets, the Richmond Park calendar, Park Life magazine for members and provide a monthly email bulletin.

You can find out more about the work of the Friends on our website ([frp.org.uk](http://frp.org.uk)), Facebook, Instagram and on Twitter.

## Membership – Joining and Rewards

Please note that membership renewals for those paying by cash or cheque only is 1st January. Individual membership is £10 and household membership is £15. Please send payment to Chris Mason – details below.

It's easy to become a member: you can sign up online at [www.frp.org.uk/membership/](http://www.frp.org.uk/membership/) using your credit card. Alternatively you can obtain a form from the website, from the Visitor Centre at Pembroke Lodge or by emailing me at: [membership@frp.org.uk](mailto:membership@frp.org.uk).

If you are a member and don't receive the monthly Friends' bulletin by email and wish to do so, please email [bulletins@frp.org.uk](mailto:bulletins@frp.org.uk) with the subject 'Add to bulletin'.

Please also include the first line of your address and post code. You can easily stop this at any time using the unsubscribe button.

If you change your email or home address then please let me know by emailing [membership@frp.org.uk](mailto:membership@frp.org.uk) and including your previous address.

If you wish to receive Park Life as a pdf instead of as a printed booklet, then email [membership@frp.org.uk](mailto:membership@frp.org.uk) with the subject as 'Park Life as pdf' using the email address registered with us.

**Neil Brereton, Membership Secretary**  
(Postal applications to: 38 Chesham Rd, Kingston, Surrey KT1 3AQ)



The Friends of Richmond Park work to protect the Park's peace and natural beauty for future generations.

Richmond Park is a National Nature Reserve, a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation.

[www.frp.org.uk](http://www.frp.org.uk)

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