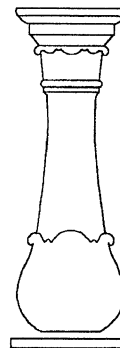


# VALENTINES PARK CONSERVATIONISTS NEWSLETTER

Honorary Vice Presidents: Mike Gapes MP Ted Fawcett OBE



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

Issue no. 19 November 2004

## Parkswatch meetings

Ever since the scheme was initiated several years ago by Redbridge council's Leisure Services managers, VPC members have been invited to report concerns and attend meetings as Parkswatch co-ordinators for Valentines Park. When the Parkswatch scheme began it just involved Valentines, but now many other parks, recreation grounds and open spaces have co-ordinators who attend regular meetings. Whilst the scheme is not as effective as we would wish, it at least provides some opportunity to raise matters of concern - such as vandalism, malpractices by any of the contractors and repairs required - with Patrick Buttress, the Parks and Countryside Manager. Over the past year VPC committee member Julie Bradley has joined me at these meetings, as she 'patrols' the park daily with her dog Barney, and is very observant of any damage and suspicious incidents as they occur.

Many of the problems Valentines faces are shared with other parks. Parkswatch meetings provide an opportunity for co-ordinators to brief councillors, especially the Leisure Committee members who usually attend the meetings. During the past year political changes in Redbridge have resulted in us seeing councillors Joyce Ryan, Bob Littlewood and Mark Aaron, which has helped us build up some cross-party awareness of the security issues faced by park staff and users. Councillors on this committee also vote for funding required by the parks. It is a depressing fact that over the past twenty years the parks maintenance budget has been steadily slashed in real terms, and we feel the perception that such funding is a low council priority needs to be changed.

Day by day, Redbridge becomes more congested and polluted, so the maintenance of beautiful and secure parks and open spaces, into which people and wildlife may escape, is increasingly vital to a healthy and happy quality of life in our borough.

Unfortunately, local press reports of muggings and thefts of mobile phones in several parks have led to children being told to avoid parks on their routes to and from school. Staff in Valentines' Pavilion café also report a fall in visitor numbers over the summer in the vicinity of the children's playground, in spite of the exceptionally beautiful floral bedding displays there this year. This public perception of danger is certainly out of all proportion to the real risks involved.

With park security in mind, Councillor Mark Aaron convened a special Parks Forum meeting on 4 October 2004. Senior police officers, many councillors and members of the public were present. Several councillors had recently visited other boroughs to investigate their parks management systems, and Wandsworth in particular was cited as worthy of copying. Councillor Aaron and others said they were considering innovations such as the formation of a Parks Special Constabulary with powers to arrest wrongdoers and undertake random night patrols. Despite the cost implications for the borough's budget, we hope this matter will receive the high priority it deserves.

Certainly, we need to protect Valentines' historic features, especially once these have been repaired and renovated with Heritage Lottery Fund money. Otherwise, the park's heritage will be smashed ... as was the 18th century sundial (the inspiration for the VPC's logo) near the mansion on the night of 8/9 October.

For any Parkswatch concerns, please contact Julie Bradley on (020) 8554 6309 or me on (020) 8551 1563. If you wish to report an incident in the park directly to the police please request a Crime Reference Number, as confirmation that the crime has been logged. Julie and I would also like to receive details for inclusion in our Parkswatch summaries for the park managers.

*Christine Fairfax*

## Gilbert White study day

The recent Gilbert White study day, held at Valentines Mansion and led by ecology lecturer and former RSPB officer David Elcome, was greatly enjoyed by VPC members and friends. It's always a pleasure to listen to people who have mastery of their subject, and David's knowledge of Gilbert White's work brought the 18th century naturalist's essays to life. Enriched and well illustrated by a life working in ecology, David's lecture was delivered with an enthusiasm which communicated ideas as well as facts, and made us want to go and see the 'natural history' all around us for ourselves.

In the best tradition of Gilbert White, the group rounded off an excellent lunch with a nature walk before the afternoon study session. One day a restored Valentines Mansion may host high-tech interactive study days, but as it stands expectantly poised between two worlds, there was a particular pleasure in once again closing the shutters and lighting up the magic lantern ...

Thanks are due to the VPC committee for organising this event, and to Christine Fairfax in particular for her hard work (and flower arrangements) on the day.

*Sally Reed*

## Coach trip to Colchester and Beth Chatto Gardens

We were very lucky again this year with good weather for our day out in July. Colchester offered so much to do and see that a whole day could have been happily spent visiting interesting places such as the castle, market, Roman ruins, museums, and the lovely Castle Park by the river.

The afternoon spent at Beth Chatto Gardens was a delight, with the different types of garden - such as water, woodland and gravel - offering something of interest to everyone. At every turn there was something to catch the eye and examine, and many of us brought plants home from the nursery. Our thanks to chairman Stephen Smith for being on hand to give advice and answer our many queries - a great bonus.

Next June we are planning to visit Mottisfont Abbey and Gardens in Hampshire. More details to follow in the next edition of the VPC newsletter.

*Dinah Mullineux*

*Many thanks to Dinah for again organising an enjoyable coach trip for the VPC. The pairing of Colchester with Beth Chatto Gardens was an inspired choice, as visiting two very different locations in one day provide variety, yet a horticultural theme was maintained by visiting the resplendent park and gardens surrounding the city's castle museum. Here, lush, well-maintained beds and borders showed what can be done by a local authority, given the will. We can only hope that Valentines may one day approach such standards, once the Heritage Lottery Fund money is put to use. In the meantime, we look forward to Dinah's next planned excursion, to Mottisfont Abbey.*

*Karen Lane*

## The trees of Valentines Park VIII

There are two small but interesting trees in the corner of the park near Valentines High School. Behind the grotto at the end of the canal nearest Cranbrook Road is a Judas Tree (*Cercis siliquastrum*), so named after the legend that it was from one of these trees that Judas Iscariot hanged himself after betraying Christ, though the name may also refer to Judea, the tree's place of origin.

The Judas Tree is related to the Redbud species, very old woody plants in terms of evolution. It is deciduous, with simple heart-shaped leaves, and clusters of pea-type rose/mauve flowers which often sprout directly from the branches in May, appearing either before or with the leaves. In the past, when sugar was expensive, it's said that the flower petals were used as a sweetener. It is a pity that the example in the park is rather over-shadowed by larger trees, so that it doesn't get the full sunlight it prefers and the blossom can't be fully admired.

Not far away, on the bank of the horsepond is a Corkscrew or Dragon Claw Willow (*Salix matsudana - tortuosa*), whose branches are tortuous and twisted, as the name implies. These contortions are most acute on the new shoots, but gradually smooth out as the limbs grow, and are only slight in the bole of the tree. Catkins appear along with the bright green foliage. The tree was introduced to this country from north China in the 1920s, and has become popular in parks and gardens since the 1950s, being valued for its long season in leaf. Like most willows, it enjoys moisture, so this one is well sited.

*Janet Plimmer*

**Seen in the Park ...***Pyracantha* - firethorn

by Margaret Elvin

**Valentines jazz**

We are very pleased to announce the return of the popular swing combo *Who Else For Jazz?* to Valentines Mansion on 12 February 2005. The band, now expanded to a five-piece outfit, will once again be playing a selection by the all-time greats such as Duke Ellington and Cole Porter; and who knows, it may even slip in the odd romantic number as a nod to being at Valentines on the nearest Saturday to Valentines Day.

The concert is being jointly organized by the VPC and Friends of Valentines Mansion, who have plans to clean and decorate parts of the house in preparation for this and other events. If you would like to help with the final clean- and tidy-up from 11.00am on Friday 11 February, please contact Cherry Hooker on (020) 8554 2414

The last concert by *Who Else For Jazz?* at the mansion was a sell-out, with demand for tickets far outstripping the number available, so make sure you book early, using the enclosed form, for what promises to be another evening's superb entertainment.

Karen Lane

*In the March 2004 newsletter Peter Hopkins wrote about Valentino the Mediterranean Gull, who had overwintered in the park for four successive years. He predicted that the bird would return for his fifth winter on or around the 20 October this year. True to form, Valentino arrived on the 16 October and, according to Peter, is now ready to receive visitors!*

**Credit where it's due ...**

No one would claim that summer 2004 was one of the great British summers. But in one respect it was - as anyone who visited the park and passed the exceptional bedding displays by the mansion and Pavilion café could see. This year, the park staff excelled themselves and produced long lasting, well designed and well maintained displays that provided masses of bright - almost vibrant - summer flowers, complemented by more subtle arrangements of plants and colours. Displays such as these were once common in the borough's parks and gardens but are now, sadly, the exception. Hopefully as the park's restoration gets under way, there will be far more opportunities for new and inventive plantings schemes that will delight park visitors and demonstrate the staff's talents for display and arrangement. Congratulations to all involved!

David Lane

**Membership renewals**

As membership of the VPC lapses on 31 December 2004 (except for newer members who joined on or after 1 October this year), I hope you will decide to continue to support the VPC in 2005, by completing the enclosed renewal slip and returning it to me with your annual subscription, which stays at £6.00, or £3.50 unwaged. I shall be very pleased to receive these, together with any donation you may wish to make towards our Restoration Fund. Your concern for the park's future and support of the VPC's work are greatly appreciated by the committee as we look towards further achievements.

Margaret Elvin

## **EVENTS DIARY**

### **Saturday 27 & Sunday 28 November**

*Hedge the Edge weekend.* For this year's autumn planting project, postponed from 30 and 31 October, the VPC will be planting a mixed native-species hedge along the Emerson Road railings in front of the mansion. Helpers welcome for any amount of time between 10.30am and 1.00pm on Saturday and/or Sunday. Meet by the Regency border. Free refreshments for all!

### **Thursday 2 December**

*Wine Tasting for the Festive Season.* Valentines Mansion, 7.30pm. Organised by the Friends of Valentines Mansion. A relaxed social evening, with an opportunity to sample a selection of red and white wines, and finish with coffee and mince pies. Tickets £5, in advance only from Cherry Hooker, Please make cheques payable to *Friends of Valentines Mansion*, and enclose a stamped addressed envelope with your order.

### **Sunday 12 December**

*Birdwatching with Peter Hopkins.* Peter leads a walk to look at some of the resident species and winter migrants in the park at this time of year. 2.30-4.00pm. Meet by the Pavilion café.

### **Sunday 2 January 2005**

*Building on Success.* Stephen Smith leads a guided tour round the historic core of Valentines, looking at some of the structures and landscaping - from grottoes and lakes to walkways and vistas - commissioned by some of the more financially successful owners of Valentines Mansion in the past. Walk begins at 2.00pm and will last about 45 minutes. Meet by the mansion's Regency border.

### **Saturday 12 February**

*Valentines Jazz.* Valentines Mansion, 8.00-10.30pm. Organised in conjunction with the Friends of Valentines Mansion: a welcome return for the popular swing quintet *Who Else for Jazz?*

Tickets £7.50 (concessions £6) in advance only, with interval refreshments extra on the night. Places limited, so please book early, using the enclosed form.

The Friends will be organising a clean-and tidy-up of the mansion in preparation for the concert from 11.00am on Friday 11 February. If you would like to help with this, please contact Cherry Hooker on (020) 8554

### **Saturday 26 February**

Spring tidy-up of the Old English Garden, Regency Border and Rose Temple. Helpers welcome for any amount of time between 10.30am and 1.00pm. Meet by the Old English Garden.

### **Saturday 2 April**

Spring maintenance and restocking of the Old English Garden, Regency Border and Rose Temple. Help always welcome between 10.30am and 1.00pm. Meet by the OEG.

### **Sunday 10 April**

*The VPC's Annual General Meeting.* Valentines Mansion, 2.30-4.30pm. A short business meeting will be followed by refreshments and a presentation by a guest speaker. Further details in our next newsletter, due out in March 2005.

### **Saturday 18 June**

*Coach trip to Mottisfont Abbey and Gardens.* More details in our next newsletter.

#### **VPC Chairman**

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#### **Secretary**

Christine Fairfax - 020 8551

#### **Treasurer**

Gill Faul - 01992 814948

#### **Membership Secretary**

Margaret Elvin - 020 8554

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