Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society green spaces – some notes

History

By the end of the eighteenth century Croydon was known for the beauty of its surrounding countryside, and for its fresh air compared with that of London but our access to green spaces was under threat. Firstly across Britain landowners were receiving permission from Parliament to fence in land not already enclosed, and use of much local land that was previously open was lost. Following the Croydon Inclosure Act of 1797, in particular the former Croydon Common was divided up and fenced in. Secondly in the nineteenth century Croydon's population grew rapidly and by the 1860s it was realised how fast our land was becoming covered in housing.

So in 1865 our local authority, then the Croydon Local Board of Health, bought Duppas Hill as its first public open space for Croydon. Many ratepayers disapproved of their money being spent on land that was already open for use. However it was soon seen that the local authority buying land was the only way to protect it from development. From then on reasons land was acquired included:

- Preserving open spaces at times of heavy building in Croydon. Examples include Thornton Heath Recreation Ground in 1884, and New Addington spaces in the 1930s
- Marking the 1883 creation of the Borough of Croydon. In 1888 the new Croydon Corporation pledged £25,000 for five new parks across the new wards of Croydon, including South Norwood Recreation Ground opened 1889 and Wandle Park in 1890. In 1983 the Town Hall Gardens were revamped and extended for the hundredth anniversary of the creation of the Borough, to become the Queen's Gardens.
- Saving from an imminent threat of development, notably Croham Hurst in 1901 and Selsdon Wood in 1936
- Saving land as commons, which applies to the City of London sites Coulsdon Common and Kenley Common
- The growing recognition of the need for fresh air and exercise
- The realisation that many trees were being lost to development
- The sale of large estates, particularly after World War 1 when they were less financially viable to manage, such as Ashburton Park in 1924 and Norwood Grove in 1926
- Donations by the owners, including Betts Mead Recreation Ground in 1925 and Lloyd Park in 1930
- The London County Council Green Belt Scheme from 1935, which funded purchase of land for green belt where a need was shown. Examples are Rowdown Field purchased 1936 and Happy Valley Park in 1937

- Legislation to fulfil quotas, e.g, of playing field areas under new Education Act of 1946
- To form wildlife corridors, by linking other green areas for example Stambourne Woodland Walk
- Tramlink building up to 1999, where for example leftover land became Addiscombe Railway Park in 1998.

During World War 2 many of our parks and open spaces contributed to the national food growing effort.

Habitats

Different habitats and environments support different species and allows them to survive. Types to be found in the borough are:

- Woodland – much of it. In the north of the borough some of this is remnants of the Great North Wood
- Chalk downland – precious as rare. A large part of London's chalk downland stretches across the higher areas of Croydon and Bromley. Traditionally grazed by sheep or rabbits. Great for butterflies, bees and other insects, as the low nutrient in the chalk helps suppress grasses and so allows more flowering plants to grow. Left to its own devices chalk downland may turn to woodland
- Heathland – a rare habitat in Croydon, that also needs protecting from encroaching plants
- Grassland/meadow
- Ponds and lakes. Many are covered in the Ponds Project
- Bog gardens, notably at The Wilderness.

Different areas within the spaces such as formal areas, wild areas and playgrounds create different natural habitats which increases biodiversity within the borough.

Wildlife corridors are important, allowing birds, mammals, invertebrates, frogs/toads etc to travel, and plants to colonise.

Did you know …

- ... that urban areas can play a very important part in sustaining species of wildlife
- ... that there are other sites of value to our natural heritage such as cemeteries and churchyards, golf courses and private gardens.

Geology

Croydon is largely on chalk with overlaid patches of London Clay?

There are three main areas – in the south of the borough chalk with thin soil, sands and gravels in the centre of the borough resulting in higher ground such as Croham Hurst and Addington Hills, but poor soil created heathland and birch wood. In the north of the borough London Clay giving a wet, heavy soil that gave rise to the oak woodlands of the Great North Wood.

Birdlife

All green spaces are of value to birdlife and those listed are merely those seen in recent years. Of particular value are those spaces that link with others to form a corridor along which birds can travel in search of food, at the same time spreading seed that will form plants.

Insects

Again all green spaces encourage insects and allow them to thrive and where given these are those recently seen as prevalent. Our chalk downlands are particularly likely to attract butterflies. Green spaces are of value not only for honey bees but for bumblebees, solitary bees and other pollinators. Croydon has an above average count of stag beetles.

Plants

Soil in the Croydon area is mainly chalk or neutral? Consequently native plants include … ??

Industrial heritage

A few of the sites were formerly involved in industry or transport. These include Brickfields Meadow and Addiscombe Railway Park.

Archaeology

There are five scheduled monuments in Croydon.

Importance of our green spaces

Our green spaces are of value:

- Ecology - to wildlife
- Ecology - for their variety of habitats which add to local biodiversity
- They engender appreciation of the value of our green spaces and the importance of preserving our environment; to understand and respect the value the green spaces to our wildlife and ecology
- For reducing the urban heat effect
- For absorbing carbon

- For our own health and mental wellbeing.

Looking after our green spaces

We can help look after our green spaces by:

- Taking our litter home
- Not lighting barbecues or other fires
- Controlling dogs - especially important where sheep are present
- Not picking wild flowers
- Following the Countryside Code.

Opportunities provided by green spaces

- Exploring our local green spaces
- Sporting opportunities – see the Croydon Council's Parks and Playgrounds Directory, and the Parkrun website
- Volunteering, social and recreational opportunities. Many green spaces have Friends Groups or other initiatives that continue conservation today. See also the Association of Croydon Conservation Societies (ACCS) website www.accs-croydon.co.uk/

Recent initiatives in Croydon's green spaces

The National Lottery Heritage Fund enabled the restoration of The Wilderness.

The Brilliant Butterflies project as shown under Coulsdon Memorial Park.

Disclaimer

- We are a non-political organisation, and do not represent any of the owners of the green spaces.