

# A Breath of Fresh Air

SUMMER

The newsletter for schools from the **Horsell Common Preservation Society**

## Discover Horsell Common's Heathland

At one time, many thousands of years ago, much of southern England was covered with forest. The early Britons gradually removed the timber to use for fuel and building, and put the land to use to grow crops and rear livestock.

Exposed to the weather the sandy soil gradually became poor and acid. Soon only plants like heather that could flourish in these nutrient-poor conditions were left. By the iron age, large areas were probably open heathland.

For many centuries this open landscape continued as people used the land to provide fire wood and when that ran out they would cut turves to use as fuel.

In this special habitat many kinds of wildlife came to depend on the heathland for their survival. Species found nowhere else in Britain. The habitat is particularly good for reptiles and two species - sand lizard and smooth snake are restricted to heaths in southern England. It is also important for many kinds of insects and the birds that feed on them including the Dartford warbler, hobby, nightjar, stonechat and woodlark.

Heathland gets its name from heather that grows there. We think of heath as a natural habitat but it is essentially man made. In the 1800's as the

country became more industrialised people no longer needed heathland commons for their survival. Gradually because nobody was cutting fuel or grazing animals, nature again began to take over and scrub and trees started to return.

Much of our heathland has been lost through neglect and with it the very special wildlife that depends on it. We cannot hope to recreate the large open treeless expanses of times gone by. Doing nothing is not an option, if that happens then in 50 years there will be no habitat for the sand lizard, nightjar, hobby and Dartford warbler and they will have disappeared as well. That is why we cut down trees, spray bracken and why cattle have been introduced so that at least some of this unique habitat and the creatures that rely on it can continue to survive and thrive.

During July large areas of the Common turn pink/purple as the heather comes into bloom. There are three types of heather - Ling, Bell Heather and Cross-leaved heath all of them can be found on Horsell Common. Ling is the most abundant and comes into bloom later than Bell Heather and Cross-leaved heath.

Ling and Bell Heather prefer dry soil while the paler grey-green Cross-leaved heath will thrive in wetter areas.



*Cross-leaved heath has grey-green downy leaves that appear on the stem in a cross pattern. The flowers are pale pink.*



*Bell heather has leaves growing in groups of three on thin woody stems the flowers are a purple-red colour.*



*Ling has leaves that grow in four rows along its woody stem. The flowers are small and pink*

## Early signs of life on Horsell Common

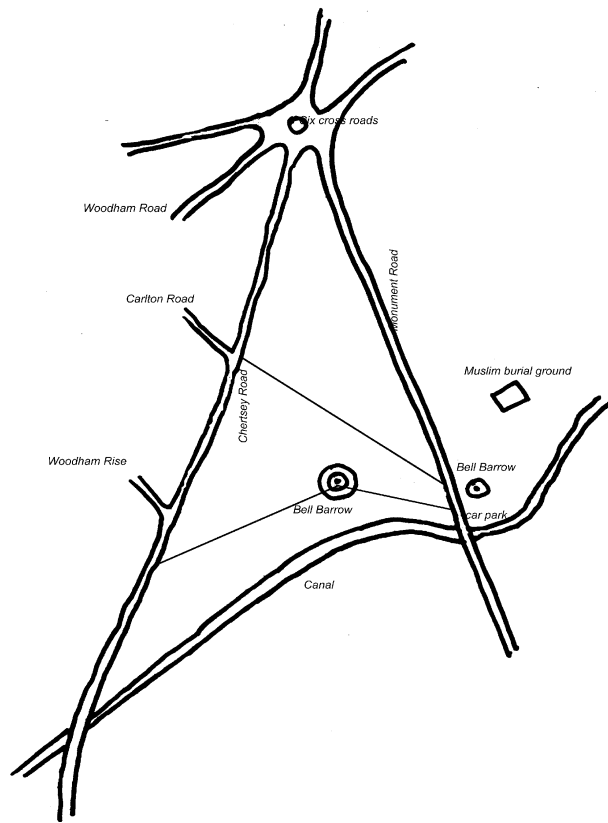
There is evidence that people were living on Horsell Common 3,500 years ago. Near the canal at Monument Bridge there are three tumuli. The tumuli or barrows as they are also called were built by Bronze Age Man around 1500 BC.

There are two bell barrows and a disc barrow and they get their name from their shape. Bell barrows are burial monuments, the burials were normally cremations. They are thought to be for people who were important members of the community maybe chiefs or elders.

The easiest one to find is on the path that runs from opposite the car park at Britannia Wharf to a point on the Chertsey Road between the Welcome to Woking sign and Woodham Rise. The path is overgrown at the Chertsey Road end.

The Barrow is circular in shape and has a central mound that is about 1.2 m high and about 28m in diameter. The disc barrow next to it has almost disappeared.

Bell barrows (particularly multiple barrows) are rare nationally, the majority of the known examples occur further west in Wessex. The existence of the barrows indicates that Horsell was probably an important site for early bronze age man.



English Heritage consider the area to be of national importance as it is one of the best examples in Surrey. Large trees and scrub have been removed to prevent roots from damaging the site, but the smaller plants, such as heather, act as protection and help to prevent the barrow from being worn away.

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## The Muslim Burial Ground

The Muslim Burial Ground, which is now owned by Horsell Common, can be found on the opposite side of Monument Road to the large bell barrow. It can just be seen from the road through the trees.

Built in 1917 the cupola or dome over the entrance reflects the design of the Shah Jehan Mosque.

At the time many troops from the Empire were fighting in France during the First World War. The War Office purchased the land and commissioned the burial ground to dispel rumours that Muslim troops were not being buried according to their religious customs. The site was chosen because it was near to the Mosque.

One officer cadet and 19 troops were buried. The majority came from what is now known as Pakistan, many from the town of Multan in central Pakistan. During the Second World War a further eight service men were buried.

The isolated position of the burial ground has meant that over many years it has suffered from vandalism. In 1969 in consultation with the Imam of the Mosque it was decided to move the bodies to Brookwood Military Cemetery.

The structure is a Grade II listed building and is desperately in need of conservation. The minarets at the corners are still intact but many of the arches have been damaged or pulled down. Horsell Common Preservation Society together with Woking Borough Council and the Muslim community are discussing ways of raising money, so that it can be restored and preserved.

In 1998 the building was adopted by Monument Hill Primary School as part of the Schools Adopt a Monument project. The children produced plans to turn the inside into a walled garden of remembrance. This may turn out to be the best and most fitting option.