

## Common fires give cause for serious concern

Since the beginning of the year there has been an increase in the number of fires on the Common. Some of the fires are the result of careless actions, but many are thought to have been started deliberately.

A spokesman for the Common said: "There is evidence that some of the fires are deliberate. Horsell Common is well known for its rare birds in particular Nightjars which nest on the ground, heathland fires at this time of year can have a devastating effect. The adult birds can escape by flying away but the young birds are often killed by the smoke and hot fumes. It is a particularly nasty way to die."

So far this year there have been fires on the Main Common, Forge and Wheatsheaf Commons and the tumuli. A significant number have occurred when the schools are on holidays which indicate that young people may be involved.

Dave Magness the Horsell police officer said: "I'm aware of under age drinking and youths lighting fires on the common. There have also

been three suspicious fires at the old Ducketts Farm. Arson is a very serious crime and we will be patrolling the Common during the summer. Alcohol and fires are a dangerous mix and I am concerned that this type of behaviour could lead to a serious incident."

Horsell Common is not alone in experiencing an increase in the number of common fires. Surrey Fire and Rescue Service is urging people to take extra care during the dry summer months. John Ingrams head of fire safety said: "As temperatures increase, so does the risk of fire. Unfortunately we've already had one of the largest common fires in the county's history. We are lucky this year, no-one has been injured by these fires. However, any fire could result in the loss of life or serious injury to members of the public."

The advice if you discover a fire is not to waste time trying to put it out. Call 999 ask for the Fire Service, give the location of the fire and direct the emergency services to the fire when they arrive.



*Evidence of the recent fire on Wheatsheaf Common, which caused considerable damage. There was concern that the fire could have spread to neighbouring properties with very serious consequences.*

## The Sandpit

During the summer months, if the weather is fine, the sandpit is a popular place for families to spend an afternoon.

The banks that face towards the south are home to over 180 different species of solitary bees and wasps. This is one of several areas on the Common that has been designated a Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

The small smooth round pebbles on the floor of the sandpit are an indication that millions of years ago the whole area was under the sea. The movement of the tides rounded and smoothed the stones.

Old maps show that sand and gravel have been extracted from the Common for many centuries, and evidence of old workings can still be found to-day.

Many of the older houses in Horsell would have been constructed using local materials. The charges for sand in 1924 were 1 shilling (5p) per load for use inside the Parish, and 1 shilling and six pence (71p) for use outside. Sand extraction finally ended in the 1960's.

Local author H G Wells who lived in Maybury used the sandpit as the landing site for Martian space craft in his novel "War of the Worlds". Today it is still a site of pilgrimage for many science fiction fans who travel from all over the world.

The "Beach" area of the current sandpit is regularly skimmed to help keep it clean and safe. The material removed is used to maintain the tracks. During the floods of autumn 2000 plans were made with Woking Borough Council for the removal of sand to fill sand-bags.

## Conservation volunteers

During the winter months, October to March, volunteers work to clear scrub and small trees for the heathland areas of the Common. Many young people lend a hand as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme.

If you are looking for a conservation project for your DoE award visit [www.horsellcommon.co.uk](http://www.horsellcommon.co.uk) for dates and times.

Working parties start in October and usually take place on Sunday mornings 10-1pm. You will need to wear gloves and boots, or a stout pair of shoes, hand tools are provided. Young people under 15 years old will need to be accompanied by an adult.

*Recently I was given a small book of poems written by a lady called Marguerite Diboll who lived in South Road at the beginning of the last century. In her poems she recalls her memories of Old Horsell Village. This is one about the sandpits.*

### The Sandpits

Families used to be quite large  
So our treats were rather rare,  
We made the best of what we had  
And we learned to give and share.

Up to the common we would go  
And we took a picnic tea.  
The sandpits were our special haunts  
Where we played so happily.

Later, "The Bedser Boys" lived near,  
And maybe they learned to play  
Cricket out on the common there  
Where we often spent the day.

I remember soldiers camped there,  
It was in the first world war,  
Searchlights seemed to be everywhere,  
Trenches were dug by the score.

They all led up to the cross roads  
But it was forbidden ground,  
So we had to play nearer home  
Where we were more safe and sound.

But when the war was all over  
And the peace treaty was signed,  
We all rushed up to the sandpits  
To see what was left behind.

There to our joy was a fortress  
And for years it did remain,  
How we loved to walk on the top  
And include it in our games.

For the sandpits were our seaside  
Where families spent the day,  
Castles were built and mums rejoiced  
As there was nothing to pay.

We all used to keep together,  
Big ones took care of the rest,  
It was much safer in those days  
In that we were truly blessed.

*In nearly 100 years somethings have not  
changed we still have wars and children  
still play in the sand.*