FRIENDS OF BUTTS CLOSE

AN OCCASIONAL NEWSLETTER

February 2014

Perhaps we should be Friends of Butts Lakes instead!! Although we've all had a sodden few months, our guess is that, like most people in Hitchin, we reckon we've got off lightly, compared to the Thames Valley, and even to Wymondley.

Nevertheless, Butts Close has suffered from the rains, with the lower half partly flooded, and the top half muddy.

Regiment Fitness

In April last year we told Andrew Mills, NHDC, of our concerns regarding the excessive wear and damage being done to the north end of the Close by the exercisers of Regiment Fitness. We reported his response in our April 2013 Newsletter – the organisation had been told to rotate their use of the Close to ensure that wear was not in one place – and we noted that they had complied.

But sadly their use of the Close over the winter has once again been concentrated on the north-west part. This has resulted in large areas of muddy grass which have little chance to recover, as it is being used four times weekly by up to sixty people at any one session, and the section against the rails on Fishponds Road (where they unload their equipment) is now bare of any grass at all.

We reported this to Andrew Mills again. He has responded:

- The Close is a public open space and the Council has no enforcement powers to prevent its use by this or another organisation
- he has advised them once again to rotate their use of the Close
- he has said that NHDC would certainly bill them for any repair and restitution that was required
- he has put a report to Councillors recommending that commercial organisations be charged a fee for using public open spaces, including the Close.

We have also seen that a rugby team is now using the Close for practice sessions on Sundays - they appear to be from a school or a similar organisation.

A public open space is just that – open, and public. It surely must remain a community amenity and not just a 'pretty green lawn'. But in our view neither should it become a sports field nor an open-air extension of a Gym, and any degradation of either its surface quality or of its truly open access would be a reduction in its amenity value: you may not be able to walk safely across a muddy field, or through a football match in progress.

No one yet (we think!) has suggested erecting changing rooms on Butts Close, but how the community can ensure a balance is kept – and if necessary enforced – is not easy. Your thoughts would be most welcome – do email us at buttsclose@gmail.com.

Crumbling Bollards

We reported on the situation of the bollards in the June 2013 newsletter. Andrew Mills had then said that he was aware of the deterioration of the concrete bollards on the Bedford Road side, and was thinking about the idea of replacing them with wooden rails to match those already in place on the Fishponds Road side. He also said that the Council had no specific budget for this and it would have to be done on an ad hoc basis.

However, the Council has since published its Green Space Management Strategy[1] and this contained proposals for capital investment to deliver it. The Council Cabinet has approved these proposals as they pertain to Butts Close. The three elements of the strategy that are planned to be funded (in 2015) are:

- a new pathway
- replacement of benches
- replacement of the gate for vehicular access (from Fishponds Road)

Sadly however the bollards did not form part of the strategy. We have asked Andrew Mills for an indicative timetable for their replacement.

Swimming Centre/Archers Developments

James Bliss has advised us of progress to date:

- the new fitness studios have been completed, the equipment has been delivered and the studios are now open. James has been pleased with the quality of the build by the contractors, Borras
- the Changing Village is also close to completion
- He expects full restitution of the grounds by Borras to be completed by March or April, including of course the temporary access area to the west of the building site
- James also wanted, via this Newsletter, to again thank residents near Butts Close for their patience and understanding during these works.

The consensus seems to be that on-site management by Borras together with the overview by James Bliss has resulted in minimal mess and disruption, given the scale of these works.

[1] http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/rx-7024_green_space_management_strategy-v5-2.pdf

The only 'mess' now is the appearance of more graffiti on the Swimming Centre's west-facing wall. Perhaps someone could decipher the tags?

The Tank, Part III

In the June 2013 Newsletter we reported that John Norris (Bedford Road) remembered playing on military equipment on the Close as a child in the 1940s. He had also said that there was more than just the single tank there.

And here is the proof! Mike Clarke (Hitchin Forum) has unearthed a postcard (left) from the Hitchin Museum archives, which clearly shows not just the original tank but also an artillery piece and a gun carriage in the distance to the left. An enlargement of this section seems to show two children playing on it (probably not John Norris...!)

The picture might also suggest that Butts Close was used for boomerang practice....

If anyone has other photographs or stories of interest about Butts Close, do please let us know.

Ellie, Helen, John, Stuart, Tony

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