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## CLAPHAM COMMON

Clapham Common Nov 2021.Docx

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10 December 2021

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**CLAPHAM COMMON**

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 General

This report is intended to supplement the more comprehensive assessment of conditions in the 'Events' area of Clapham Common following a previous visit in August. The site was examined on 17 November 2021.

## 1.2 Extent of the site

The 'Event area' is shown again in the Google Earth imagery in Figure 1-1. This comprises approximately 77 000 m<sup>2</sup> (7.7 hectares, 19.0 acres, 0.077 km<sup>2</sup>).



Figure 1-1 Approximate outline of Event area

## 2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

As would be expected, grass growth and establishment had continued over the months since the previous examination of the site. In many places, notably those unaffected by the earlier events or more recent activities, a reasonably full ground cover had developed.



**Figure 2-1 General appearance of ground cover to the western side of the event area**

A general observation, however, was that the grass growth was nowhere especially vigorous, except possibly along the eastern boundary where the soil was substantially amended during the single pipe drain installation.



**Figure 2-2 Typical appearance of sward at eastern end of event site**

Evidence of a generally slow growth rate could be seen in the localised stimulation of growth associated, most probably, with animal deposits and which contrasted with the extent of growth taking place around these instances.



**Figure 2-3 Localised stimulation of growth associated with animal droppings**

Along the eastern boundary, the altered topography, and the proximity to the fence, may have prevented this area from being mown as frequently as elsewhere or with the same equipment.



**Figure 2-4 Longer and more vigorous growth along the eastern boundary**

Certainly the sward height was significantly longer here than across the wider event area and a fuller ground cover had come about. A similar phenomenon was noted in areas under or close to trees where mowing is rarely, if ever, carried out.



**Figure 2-5 Longer grass in areas below trees left unmown for longer periods**

Sward height across the site was approximately 18 mm, rather too close under the circumstances.

In the former compound and access area, substantial grass re-establishment had been achieved in an area yet to be re-introduced to the general mowing regime.



**Figure 2-6 Grass re-establishment in access area**

A few areas of thin, although not quite bare, ground persisted. In these places, formerly denuded of all grass cover and the sites of particular event installations, establishment from newly-incorporated seed appeared to have taken place slightly more slowly than elsewhere.



**Figure 2-7 Examples of persistently thinner ground cover in event installation areas**

In the heavily used central section of the eastern side of the event area ground cover recovery had been generally successful but was still in need of filling out, a process likely to be achieved by encouraging more substantial growth rather than be over-seeding.



**Figure 2-8 Central section of main event area to the east**

Only a few smaller areas remained completely bare, all of which were situated in the area of greatest event activity to the east.



**Figure 2-9 Persistent areas of bare ground**

Generally to the west of the event area, there was abundant evidence of ‘casual’ play, probably football, having been played. Combined with the close mowing height, this had produced numerous areas of thin ground cover due to wear, though no obvious goal mouth areas could be identified.



**Figure 2-10 Football wear in close-mown sward**

Examination of the soil profile of the eastern section showed the good texture of topsoil within the top 100 mm or so. There was little evidence of any sand amendment near the surface of this profile, however.



**Figure 2-11 Soil profile to the east (left) and west**

In the western section the profile was essentially the same but penetration by hand auger was more difficult, reflecting the greater amount of compaction in this area, largely unamended by the renovation work carried out to the east.



### 3 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The instinctive response to any perceived requirement to achieve greater grass or leaf cover over any area is to reach for a fertiliser. I understand, however, that most non-organic chemical products are banned from use on the site. While this may be a problem when trying to re-establish substantial areas from seed, more generally, given that clippings are not boxed off after mowing, the extent of nutrient removal taking place is likely to be fairly minimal. The requirement for fertiliser input should, therefore, be similarly low.

A good deal of work has gone into restoring ground cover to the events area. In the light of this, apart from the entrance section, the extent of grass growth and recovery noted over much of the site is generally rather disappointing. This could be related to the minimal fertiliser inputs. However, the close mowing height that has been adopted is also, almost certainly, largely responsible. Without a sufficient leaf cover, the consequences of wear will be much greater than they need be. A re-appraisal of the mowing regime would therefore be appropriate.

The close mowing height adopted over the events area is applied because the same mower is used for the entire common, including the marked and formal football pitches to the west. Varying mowing heights on gang mowers of any kind is a time-consuming business and adjusting this on a regular basis would most certainly not be appropriate for application to such large areas. So, while the use of just one mower at the closest setting necessary may seem like an economically sound policy, this is not the case. The closer grass is cut, the more frequently it needs to be cut. If the standard for the entire site is to achieve football-type swards then, through the growing season, mowing will be necessary at least on a weekly basis. But the proportion of the Common given over to football is probably quite small and the entire event section is not given over to formal sport at all. If a mowing height of, say, 50 or 75 mm were to be adopted for areas not marked out for football, these would require mowing only once a fortnight or possibly even less frequently. Given the size of the areas concerned, this must represent a very considerable potential for achieving savings.

In addition, raising the sward height over the events area should improve its recovery from previous activities, and increase its resilience to future activities very significantly.

The drawback is that, in wet conditions, people may not like to walk as freely across the site with longer grass cover as they may have become accustomed to due to the possibility of getting their feet wet. Their pets will not have the same concerns but this leads to the possibility of creating pathways of shorter grass for pedestrians to move about the Common while limiting the extent of wear damage across the wider area. That wider area would include more sensitive locations, for example the amended areas to the east, where grass is trying to re-establish. Such pathways may, of course, be relocated simply by altering the mowing pattern, long and short, as evidence of excessive wear becomes apparent.

This approach is an extension of the policy of not mowing at all beneath trees and leads to the exciting possibility that the entirety of the non-formal sports areas of the Common could be sculpted, during the growing season at least, to produce an interesting mosaic of grass lengths, criss-crossed by easily relocatable footpaths.

In practice, the approach might commence, in the first instance, with the incorporation of a mowing height of, I would say, 60 mm. This can only be accomplished using a rotary mower and would be appropriate across the entire Common, with the exception of the sports pitches and their surrounds where spectators will congregate. Note that the adoption of this mowing height on the eastern section will not only improve wear tolerance but should also quietly discourage the use of the area for casual organised sports as it has been noted takes place a good deal at present.

Rotary mowers able to accomplish this operation are standard equipment for most authorities. Given the generally very flat areas with which we are concerned, the most basic tractor-mounted, deck mowers would be suitable, an example of which is shown in Figure 3-1 as an individual deck and as a gang.



Figure 3-1 Individual and gang deck mowers

When the grass has reached a point, probably some time next spring, when the 60 mm cut needs to be carried out, it would be appropriate to identify where particular routes for pedestrians might, initially, be established. These would then need to be mown out using the football (cylinder) mower at 18 mm (though this should ideally be raised to 25 mm at least).

An example of how these paths might be set out in the first instance is shown in Figure 3-2.



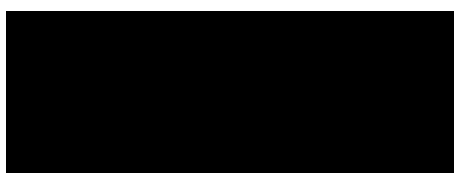
Figure 3-2 Possible pattern of 25 mm and 60 mm cutting heights for forthcoming growing season

This approach has enormous benefits from an ecological point of view also. The longer the grass, the greater the bio-diversity the sward is able to sustain. There would now be 3 heights of cut in which wildlife could thrive, the football cut, the rotary cut and the under-tree non-cut. When clearly defined, this variation is very pleasing to the eye and gives the sense of a very tidy and well-maintained environment.



**Figure 3-3 Labyrinth incorporated into rotary mown public open space**

Taking the procedures one step further, opens up other possibilities the general public may appreciate. One such idea is that of incorporating designed features, a popular concept being that of the labyrinth. A small example, produced using a pedestrian rotary mower in 60 mm rotary mown turf on public open space, is shown in Figure 3-3. Such features can have spiritual significance for some (labyrinths are of historical interest and come in many designs) while for others they are simply attractive things to look at. They exist in this form only for the time someone is willing to create them and can be located anywhere.



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**10 December 2021**