



In recent weeks, as we come to terms with changes to our lives, the common has given us a valuable space to connect with the natural world and its annual rhythms. 150 years ago, in 1870, the French Imperial family arrived in

Chislehurst in exile, and reports show that they also appreciated the peace and beauty of the area.

Emperor Napoleon III, Empress Eugenie, and the Prince Imperial, Louis Napoleon, lived at Camden Place. They were often seen out and about on the common. The Emperor would stroll across the road to attend cricket matches, although it is reported that he never understood the game.

One of our supporters recalls a story that, after a particularly spectacular catch, he sent his valet across to ask for an “action re-play.”



Unfortunately for Empress Eugenie, her time in Chislehurst brought sadness and loss. The Emperor died in 1873 and the Prince Imperial, her only son, was killed in a war in South Africa in 1879. The monument to his memory faces the path taken by the Empress each Sunday on her way to St. Mary's Church.

(The gentleman on the right of the photo appears to be in a uniform. If anyone recognises the uniform, please let us know. It would be wonderful if it was the Commons Keeper of the time!)



Her route may have taken her along Watts Lane, which, with the bridle path and flourishing verge, still has a rural aspect, although it would have been much more open at the time.

In 1873, the Evening Standard, reporting on the funeral of the Emperor, carried the following description;

*“A queer, picturesque, old-world little place, all up hill and down dale, approached from the railway station by an archway which gives it a fortified, mediaeval aspect. There is a motionless windmill on a hill, a cluster of cabins placidly sheltering in a ridge, a church, a rough, furze-covered Common, two taverns – that is Chislehurst.”*



Another route would have taken her through the Overflow Glade, a pleasant walk on a sunny morning, and across the road to The Racecourse - the path from Bromley Road to Camden Close, between the Pit at St. Nicholas School and the wall of Camden Close.

It is known as The Racecourse because it was the home straight of an annual horse race that started on the footpath above Rush Pond and turned at Prickend Pond. The finishing post was outside Camden Court, which stood on the site of what is now Camden Close (shown here on the right) and was marked by a whalebone arch, the remains of which are still visible.



The changes to the common since grazing ceased have created an additional habitat. The woodland now provides shelter and shade for a variety of wildlife. However, much remains that the Imperial Family would recognise. We work hard to preserve and develop all these precious areas of woodland, heathland, wetland and grass.

**Chislehurst Commons has responsibility for managing the 180 acres of local common land under an Act of Parliament.**

**We have two Keepers, Jonathan Harvie, our Head Keeper, and Peter Edwards, our Assistant Keeper, whose knowledge and dedication are invaluable. Everyone else involved in the administration, maintenance and development of the area does so on a voluntary basis.**

**The Act made no provision for funding, and we depend on donations and our wonderful Working Party to enable us to continue to preserve this precious natural resource.**

**Would you like to be a true friend of the Commons? You can donate now by cheque or via the [Donate link](#) at the end of this Newsletter.**

**Thank you!**



One of the grassland areas of the common, rich with flowers and insect life.



Our wonderful Volunteer Working Party raking the grass at the end of the season, in order to preserve the acid grassland.



This careful conservation work promotes the growth of a variety of flowering plants. The picture shows Cow Wheat which is currently in bloom in the Overflow Glade.



A Great Spotted Woodpecker chick, anxiously waiting for its mother to return with food. The common outside Camden Park was always more wooded than the rest, and the Imperial Family may well have walked under some of the trees that still line the path.

**And finally .....**



To continue the Imperial theme, an Emperor dragonfly, a wonderful sight among the heather.

Our common is truly an amazing place, the vibrant and precious centre of life in Chislehurst, now, in the past, and for the future.

**Thanks for this week's photos to Don Drage, Mavis Drage, Peter Edwards, Kevin Jennings and Mary Wheeler.**



**Chislehurst Commons are proud to display the Green Flag Award logo.**

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