

# Happy Valley Park history

When it was purchased under the Green Belt Scheme in 1937, Happy Valley was described as 'One of the most beautiful valleys in the whole neighbourhood'. Under this scheme, a total of 860 acres of Green Belt Land were brought by the old Urban District Council of Coulsdon and Purley and the cost equally shared by the London County Council, Surrey County Council and the UDC.

In addition to Happy Valley, the areas purchased included Foxley Wood, Kingswood and Coulsdon Court among others, the idea being to keep an area of unspoilt countryside within the easy reach of Londoners.

Happy Valley was acquired, in part, to link town neighbouring areas of open owned and managed by the City of London - Farthing Downs and Coulsdon Common. The area included the steep-sided valley itself, and the adjoining areas of Devilsden Wood, Glebelands (given by Caterham and Warlingham Urban District Council) and at a later date the Parson Pightle Estate.

Originally known as the 'Coulsdon Greenbelt Lands', the name 'Happy Valley park' was adopted for the whole area in 1970. More recently the site has become known simply as Happy Valley, reflecting the fact that it is now regarded and managed more as an area of open countryside than a formal park.

Happy Valley consists of just over 250 acres of downland grass and wooded slopes, dominated by a steep-sided dry valley at the centre. For centuries the natural regeneration of woodland and shrubs on both Farthing Downs and Happy Valley was held back by sheep and rabbit grazing, but in 1937 systematic grazing was discontinued and 'scrub' was also due to the drop in numbers of nature's lawn mower, the rabbit, which was greatly reduced by the disease Myxomatosis.

Between 1956 and 1966 much of the area was leased to a local farmer for hay crops, which were not taken, and during these years scrub invaded many of the fields that had previously been open land. When the lease on the land was terminated, the Surrey Wildlife Trust gave advice on the clearance of some of the scrub, and in 1968 and 1969 large areas of the south facing slopes were cleared, creating a wealth of new downland flora and fauna. Some dense areas of scrub were left for nesting birds and as cover for foxes and badgers.

Happy Valley is an important reserve for all kinds of animal and plant life, including many rarities. The majority of the site lies within the Farthing Downs and Happy Valley Site for Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and is a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature (SMNI).

The valley is of nature conservation value for its extensive chalk and neutral grassland and ancient woodland habitats. All the grasslands are important for their populations of the nationally rare plant 'greater yellow rattle'. In addition, the chalk slopes support many notable plants, including round-headed rampion and eight species of wild orchid. The chalk grassland on the steep valley slopes is particularly rich in wild flowers, and this in turn attracts a wide variety of insects and other invertebrates. Over 25 species of butterfly have been recorded in Happy Valley.

Bird life in the valley includes skylark, kestrel, cuckoo, nightingale, green and great spotted woodpecker, yellowhammer and several varieties of warbler. Among the mammals found in the

valley are roe deer, badgers, foxes, stoats, weasels and the nationally rare and elusive dormouse, which breeds in the woodland.

The ancient woodland is very diverse and contains a wide variety of trees, including oak, beech, ash, cherry, sweet chestnut, field maple and hazel. Throughout the site there are a number of large ancient yew trees which were planted in lines many years ago to define the property and parish boundaries.

The variety of Happy Valley's wildlife can only be maintained by careful maintenance and management of the area. Most of the grassland is managed by a variety of hay cuts at different times of year, depending on the type of plants growing in each area. Since 2002 parts of the chalk grassland have been summer grazed by cattle, sheep and goats, which provides more effective scrub control and gives more wildlife diversity than cutting the fields by tractor.

Much of the woodland is coppiced on a 15 year rotation and this again provides a greater variety of habitat for plants and animals to make use of.

A nature trail, which was originally devised in the 1970's to guide visitors around the area, has recently been updated, and a booklet is available to explain what can be seen on a walk around Happy Valley and the adjoining Farthing Downs.

During 1968, permissive horse rides were opened across the park to connect with horse rides on Farthing Downs and Coulsdon Common as well as the bridle roads Drive Road and Magazine Road, creating a total of five miles of horse rides.

From an archaeological point of view, little is known about the valley, but there are interesting sites close-by. The nearest is the saxon settlement on Farthing Downs which borders Happy Valley to the west.