

Platinum Jubilee: Thursday 2 June 2022: The Commons and the Monarchy

Remarks by the Chairman of the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators

On the occasion of Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee, we are here to pay tribute to the Queen for her enduring service to the country as our Monarch and Head of the Commonwealth for over 70 years, for the values she imbues – of dignity and grace, fairness and understanding, and the importance of serving and caring for others.

It is also a moment to pause and reflect on the Queen and her ancestors and the role that the Monarchy has played in shaping the Commons – this very special open space that has fulfilled such an important role in our community over the years.

The Commons are a remnant of the manorial system, which from medieval times had been the foundation of the country's economy. Although the land was owned by the Lord of the Manor, originally the Archbishop of Canterbury, others, known as Commoners, had rights to the land.

We have the Queen's ancestor Henry III to thank for enshrining in legislation in 1235 through the Statute of Merton an obligation for the Lord of the Manor to provide for Commoners' rights, a principle that has remained fundamental in the preservation of the Commons over the centuries that followed.

With the reformation and dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, the reigning Monarch became the Lord of the Manor of Wimbledon, and from this time, the Monarchy seems to have developed a particular interest in this area. It is a well known fact that Henry VIII stayed overnight in the Old Rectory and that Queen Elizabeth I made at least four visits to Wimbledon.

Although the manor was later passed on from the crown to the aristocracy, there remained a special connection between the Monarchy and the Manor of Wimbledon. Both Charles II and King George III a century later inspected their troops and volunteer regiments on Wimbledon Common.

In 1744, John Spencer became Lord of the Manor and shortly thereafter the first Earl Spencer. By the time the fifth Earl Spencer became Lord of the Manor over a hundred years later, most of the manor had been sold off, other than the uncultivated lands including Wimbledon Common, Putney Heath and Putney Lower Common.

Largely as a result of Earl Spencer's efforts, however, these uncultivated lands of Wimbledon Common were soon to become famous for rifle shooting, a passion shared by the Monarchy, with Queen Victoria scoring a bullseye at the first meeting of the NRA, held on Wimbledon Common in 1860.

Yet in addition to the importance of rifle shooting, the Commons also provided a treasured open space for many other outdoor pursuits including golf, horse riding, cricket, football and cross country running.

It was therefore in many ways not surprising that Earl Spencer's infamous proposal a few years later to enclose Wimbledon Common galvanised the local community and ultimately led to the creation of the Commons under a separate Act of Parliament in 1871.

Queen Victoria, the reigning Monarch at the time, deserves considerable credit for giving Royal Assent to the legislation that protected and preserved the Commons for the purposes of recreation and exercise and in doing so provided a model through which the diverse interests of the community were able to harmoniously co-exist.

As a result, the Commons today are steeped in a spirit of mutual respect and harmony, principles that Queen Elizabeth II, our Queen, embodies in all that she does – principles that she has inherited from her ancestors, nurtured all her life, and passed down to future generations.

It is probably safe to say that numerous coronations and jubilees have been celebrated on the Commons over the past 150 years, including the draining of Hookhamslade Pond to light a bonfire for the coronation of King George V. Although tonight's service may not be quite as dramatic, it is hopefully as meaningful and certainly the first to pay tribute to a Monarch for an extraordinary 70 years of public service. It is an occasion of immense historical significance.

And finally, in celebrating Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee, we celebrate in particular the Queen's passion for outdoor pursuits, her love and understanding of nature, and the importance of caring for one another and our country, for all of which we are enormously grateful to her.