

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

No 35 September 2003

Alien invasion—Japanese Knotweed comes to Highbury

By Francis Radice

What should you think if you discover an exotic plant thrusting up into your ground floor living room or poking up the tarmac or the pavings of your drive or footpath?

The chances are you are experiencing the shoot from an exploratory rhizome of a nearby infestation of Japanese Knotweed. Now this threat, known variously as Hancock's Curse, Sally's Rhubarb, Mexican Bamboo and Donkey Rhubarb has arrived in Highbury, occupying two front gardens in Aubert Park. This voracious and seemingly indestructible invader can also be seen along railway embankments, near watercourses and in some public parks or unused plots. It covers thousands of hectares, one of the worst affected areas being Swansea, which is having to spend £9.5 million on getting rid of it.

Considering that Islington Council spends less than £13 million a year on all environmental services and collects only £78 million in total from Council Tax, I thought they might be worried by an environmental threat on this scale; but when I first alerted the Parks Department to the dangers, they didn't want to know. Recently, however, they told me they were aware of the problem and were 'taking measures' on Council land. They were less certain however, about knotweed in private gardens and were not sure what to do about it; but they did agree to note its location.

On the positive side knotweed looks good and sheep and donkeys like it. So why is it illegal to plant it? And why should we beware of it?

Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) is an attractive plant with thick, pinkish, bamboo-like stems growing up to 3 metres high, originally introduced into Europe early in the nineteenth century as an ornament. In the US it was imported for landscaping and erosion control. Its leaves are shaped like those of lime-trees and it produces clusters of creamy-white flowers late in the season. It grows in dense monocultural stands and has thick leaf-litter, impenetrable by other plants and suppressing all native species. Curiously enough, while the native varieties in Japan are dioecious - unisexual, Europe

is infested solely by females. But these can spread very effectively by their rhizomes which grow to a depth of 1.5 metres and laterally, 7 metres. So it thrives on disturbance; and if you try to uproot it or cut it up the chances are you are spreading bits of it, which will quickly grow elsewhere. A small piece of stem placed in water will form a viable plant in six days.

Attempts to kill it with products such as triclopyr and glyphosate tend to give respite only, until it grows again the following season. Also many herbicides persist in the soil and kill other plants and so should be used very carefully and applied to cross sections of cut stems, taking care to follow the makers' instructions.

Why is this weed so indestructible here? The trouble is, it has an unfair advantage over local species (including a small native knotweed) because it arrived without its natural predators - insects, pathogens and nematodes. In Japan these serve to control it. So why don't the predators wipe the plant out? From an evolutionary point of view, this would be suicide for the predators as they would have nothing left to eat, so over time, the predators 'have learnt' to live symbiotically with the Knotweed and they keep each other in check. To an extent the Australians, learning from their disastrous experience with cane toads, introduced to deal with a sugar cane predator, have been successful in using such natural means of control.

Here we have to be very careful to make sure introducing predators is not going to destroy any of our native species. So tests have to be done to

ensure this is not going to happen. The time period? About three years. Meanwhile watch out for your driveways, gardens and living room floors!

An even more ominous aspect of the invasion is that the current variety is merely the advance party of the Giant Knotweed (*Fallopia bohemica*) which in male form could pollinate the current occupiers, thus producing an 'improved knotweed' better adapted to our climate and probably even more indestructible.

Whilst the experts are devising effective control measures, is it too much to hope our Council may consider whether it can really afford not to have a policy to control this weed on private land? ■



End of an era

By Beatrice Sayers

About 60 children, mums, dads and carers, turned out last month to a party to say thank you and farewell to the Two O'Clock Club's much-loved playleaders, Gary Seldridge and Roy Squibbs.

The party on August 1st, at the club's premises on Highbury Fields, also marked 20 years to the day since Gary started work there.

At an informal ceremony on the lawn, Gary and Roy were each presented with vouchers, plus a radio cassette recorder for Gary and a silver bracelet for Roy.

The farewell cake in the shape of a sandpit, complete with children playing with buckets and spades, was made specially by Two O'Clock Club mum Izzy Clarke.

"I've had a fun time," said Gary, 38, assistant playleader. "But it's time for some new blood." He added that he would miss the parents as well as the children.

At the party, Gary recalled how the club reopened in late July 1983 after being rebuilt following a fire at the bandstand. He started work a week later.

Both Gary and Roy, 34, the club's playleader, who has worked there for nine years, felt it was time to move on. Their departure coincides with a series of changes taking place at the club.

"I'm really sad to be leaving," said Roy, who lives in Tottenham. "I'll miss it massively. But I'm part-caring for my mum, and I needed to cut my work down."

It was a difficult decision to leave as both he and Gary were devoted to their jobs – and, as well as giving so much of their energy to the children, they told how they got a lot back. "This work motivated me to wake up in the morning," Roy said. "It's harder to leave than to stay."

Many of those present praised the playleaders for their energy and commitment over the years and expressed sadness at their decision to go. "They're really well liked," said Sheila Fitzgerald, a grandmother of seven who lives in Highbury. "You can't replace them."

Sheila, who has been coming to the Fields first with her own children, then her grandchildren, for 40 years, said her granddaughter Kiera was particularly sad that Roy was leav-

ing. "She's been telling me 'I'll really miss him, Nan,'" Sheila said.

"Gary's always been so kind to all my children," said Irene Whitmore, a nanny who brings children in her care to the club every day.

Responsibility for running the club lies with a committee of volunteers, who work closely with Islington Council's Child-care Trust. The committee is now taking on the necessary task of converting the Two O'Clock Club Trust into a limited company. At present, the council pays salaries and basic running costs; for all other expenses, the club relies on donations and grants.

Every weekday afternoon – except Christmas Day and Boxing Day – Roy and Gary have helped to ensure the club provides a safe and stimulating play and activity centre for Highbury's pre-school children. The indoor area includes a place for babies to sit or crawl, as well as a larger space where toddlers can paint, draw or try out new crafts.

Karen Dunne, a mother of two and the club's co-chair, said lots of new projects were in the pipeline, including music and movement, and arts programmes in the autumn.

Sam Smith, a mother and experienced nursery organiser, has been acting playleader for September, with help from Debbie Green – whose son attends the club regularly. The club is looking for permanent staff to start soon.



Roy has often led singing sessions in his rabbit costume, made specially for him by two of the grandmothers who take children to the club. "This is one of the only groups run by two men," Roy said. "That's going to be a loss."

As last month's party drew to a close, Roy put on his rabbit costume for the last time and led a large circle of children in a singing session, ending with his signature tune, the rabbit song. ■

HIGHBURY FIELDS ASSOCIATION TALK & AGM

HFA is extending an invitation to all to hear a talk by English Heritage's Assistant Regional Director for London, when it holds its AGM at **Christ Church**, Highbury Grove on **Monday 22nd September at 7.30pm**. An opportunity to quiz EH on their policies and to find out about HFA.

Free entry, but you can join HFA at the door, if you wish.

HCA goes visiting

At the request of HCA member, Abigail Lawson, MP Jeremy Corbyn kindly arranged for an HCA group to visit the Houses of Parliament - on the final, frenetic day before the summer recess.

Once past the airport-style security, we were ushered up one of the grand, stone staircases by a senior guide, whose daily duties - and loyalties - were with the House of Lords. We learnt a great deal of the constitutional framework and the daily workings of Parliament, from the useful perspective of someone whose task it is to keep order and make the place work; and we had some tantalising glimpses of Pugin's and Barry's masterwork.

Beyond the comparative calm of the House of Lords we stepped into "the corridors of power", seething at the time with a mass of various humanity from journalists and petitioners to gophers, tourists and the occasional politician. Some of us played a game of "spot the minister." We managed quite a few ex-ministers, but only one or two still in office.

Our visit ended, fittingly, in the majestic and architecturally stunning Great Hall, built by William Rufus. Its simple grandeur eclipsed the pomp and bravado of the modern palace and seemed a truer embodiment of the democratic principle. ■

Highbury car club launched

In Issue 30 of HC News we reported on the plan by *Smart Moves* to start a car sharing scheme in Islington. Highbury Fields Association featured the project at their AGM last year and found there was a lot of local interest in the idea. The hi-tech, swipe-card scheme was officially launched on 17th September with the first 'car-station' for 5 cars near to the Barclays Bank on Highbury Corner, in Highbury Crescent.

While the scheme provides competitive rates on longer hires up to 7 days, its big advantage is for short term hiring, which starts at £2.30 per hour and 15p per mile for a supermini.

To find out more:

www.smartmoves.co.uk or email londoncentral@smartmoves.co.uk or Ring 0845 3300333, for an information pack or to discuss the scheme. ■

Danger at the Barn /contd...

In Issue 34 we reported on the Highbury Hill/Highbury Grove/Leigh Road 'piazza', council transport planners installed against community advice in the Spring of this year. HCA was consulted in 1997 on the 'piazza' and along with other local representatives from Highbury Fields Association, cyclists, councillors etc gave it the thumbs

down. Hence the amazement and serious concern when the advice was ignored and the junction was changed, 6 years later, into a genuine hazard for the many children, parents with toddlers, elderly and other pedestrians and road users passing that way daily. The junction used to have two one-way roads with a safe island in between, and now it is a single two-way road, with traffic coming from four directions. 'Living Streets', formerly the Pedestrian Association, lobbied to get it changed as soon as the council started work on it in February. Martin Jones, Chair of Highbury Fields Association, who also attended meetings to get the build-out reduced and/or a central reservation installed, says "The hump they have put in does nothing to improve safety. It is the manoeuvring problems and the confusing traffic movements the new junction has caused which need to be addressed."

Christine Mabey, Chair of the Islington branch of Living Streets, asks readers who have had near misses themselves or seen a potentially dangerous incident to tell her, so a record can be made of the junction's safety.

Christine Mabey, Living Streets, 42 Highbury Place, N5 1QL Tel: 7359 0609, email cmabey@blueyonder.co.uk OR email HCA on hcanews@hotmail.com ■

THIS WEEKEND!

Sat 20th & Sun 21st September

LONDON OPEN HOUSE

This annual event opens up about 500-600 of the city's buildings to the public; admission is free, with specified opening times and tours over the weekend of Saturday and Sunday, 20th/21st September. Some restrict the numbers viewing at any one time. Not every building opens each day - for full listings throughout the capital and information on this educational charity you can check the website www.londonopenhouse.org or Ring Hotline: 09001 600 061

Some of the Islington buildings open to view:

3 Aberdeen Lane, N5 - Sun 1pm - 5pm

New family home and RIBA award winner. Concrete, glass and wood. Azman Owens Architects Tube: Highbury & Islington, Buses 4, 19, 236

Florence Trust Studios, Aberdeen Park, N5 - Sat/Sun 1pm-5pm

Grade I Listed Victorian Gothic church, now turned into studios which offer visual artists awards, exhibition opportunities and career support. William White 1866. Entry: main church building. Tube: Highbury & Islington, Buses 4, 19, 236

Old Sessions House, Clerkenwell Green, EC1 - Sat 9.30am-1pm last entry 12.30pm

Once the largest, and busiest, court building in England. Now, the London Masonic Centre and conference venue. Dome modelled on Pantheon

in Rome. Palladian front, with pediment and decorative reliefs by Nollekens. Grade II* listed. John Carter and John Rogers 1779-82. Entry: Main foyer, staircase, court rooms, cells area. Tube/Rail Farringdon. Buses 55,63

Wesley's Chapel, Museum and House, 49 City Road, EC1 - Sat 10am-4pm Sun 12noon-1.45pm (last entry Sat 3.30pm, Sun 1.30pm)

Fine Georgian complex built by John Wesley as his London base. George Dance the Younger 1778. Entry: chapel, house, museum, graveyard. Tube Old Street (Exit 4), Tube/Rail Moorgate, Liverpool Street. Buses 55,43, 76, 141, 214

Venus, 1A Elfort Road, N5 - Sat 10am-5pm. Regular tours on the hour.

Small modern studio-house and occasional gallery. Chance de Silva 1998. Tube: Arsenal, Buses 4, 19, 43, 153, 236 ■

STOP PRESS! THIS WEEKEND

LONDON OPEN HOUSE

See page 3 for details of Islington houses to view

Sat 20th & Sun 21st September

YES! We are late giving you notice of this weekend event...BUT the HC News editorial team and deliverers have done their best to get this to you by Friday 19th. If you did not get your HCNews in time for you to view a house or building, we are very sorry, but it was unavoidable. *Advance notice for 2004: London Open House Weekend 2004 Sat 18th and Sun 19th September 2004.*

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Highbury Community Association

The HCA represents 750 residents and businesses, on all aspects of living and working in Highbury, Lower Holloway and Finsbury Park. Run by volunteers, it relies on donations. Send cheques to HCA Treasurer, 75 Highbury Hill, N5 1SX made out to "Highbury Community Association".

Send letters or articles for next issue to: HC News, 83 Highbury Hill N5 1SX or email hcanews@hotmail.com

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