

A walk with the litter-pickers of Richmond Park

Text and photos by Michael Davison

Richmond Park litter picker Ron Herbert was already five hours into his working day when I caught up with him at his 10am tea break at Oak Lodge. I wanted to find out how, despite the thousands who pour in every day, the Park remains in general so remarkably litter-free. The answer, I found, lies in a hard-working staff of litter pickers employed by a firm called "fountains" who are at work rain or shine every day of the year, including Christmas Day, from 5am to 1pm in summer, and 7am to 3pm in winter. There are five full-time employees on the morning litter team, while a sixth does an afternoon shift.

As the birds start their dawn chorus, long before the earliest joggers make their appearance, Ron and colleagues arrive for work. Their first task is to make a circuit of the car parks, to clear the detritus left by the previous day's visitors from the litter bins and surrounding areas. Half the team start from Pembroke Lodge and work clockwise round the Park, while the remainder start from Ham Gate and move in the opposite direction.

They travel in trucks between the car parks, stopping on the way to clear litter from road verges. They also do a daily "sweep" of the Isabella Plantation and empty the bins there. This phase of work is scheduled to be completed by 8.30am – the deadline specified in fountains' contract. Only when clearance of car parks and verges is complete can work start on the off-road areas of the Park's 2,000-odd public acres. For this task the Park is divided into five areas, one of which is "swept" on foot by the team on each weekday. At weekends, the whole team is busy dealing with the tide of litter that accumulates around car parks and other heavily used areas.

To find out how this clearing operation works, I joined Ron Herbert for the second part of his day's work. He gathered his litter-picking tongs and a black bin bag, and we set off to cover a wide swathe round Sidmouth Wood. Ron followed a zigzag course, his eyes darting from side to side to spot the least shred of tissue or plastic, cigarette packet or orange peel. Often he stretched his arm through the railings to reach litter blown into the wood from the picnic area opposite the car park. Alert as I tried to be, Ron's eyes proved much sharper than mine – until at just one point I did have the satisfaction of spotting a crisp packet before he saw it (or so he let me believe).

Pausing for a short breather, Ron, 60, told me of his personal affection for the Park born of childhood days when, brought up in the area, he came to regard it as his personal playground. He regrets the coming of too many cars and dogs, which he feels has "changed the ambience" and been detrimental to wildlife, but still

The litter-picking team

enjoys his open-air job. He finds it ideally complements his enthusiasm for bird-watching – he pointed out to me a jackdaw, a kestrel, a mistle thrush and a stock dove during our walk. On his digital camera he showed me photographs of comma and purple hairstreak butterflies taken in the Park – as well as mementoes of a holiday in Kazakhstan.

Ron's bin bag was almost a quarter full by the time we reached the gate at the lower end of Sidmouth Wood. Here he added the contents of the nearby litter bin to his load, so it was with a full bag that we arrived back at Oak Lodge. One full bag after one man's walk of an hour and a half: no wonder that after a fine weekend the tally of bags from the team can reach 200-300. After a Bank Holiday there may be 1,000 bags in the skips at Oak Lodge awaiting removal. Recyclable material from designated bins at Park lodges is set apart for separate collection.

Back at Oak Lodge I met Ron's colleagues, relaxing at the end of their day's work. They included Tony and Susan (a husband-and-wife team), Bill, Jim and a second Ron, together with fountains contract manager Andrew Hand. Chatting to them I learned something of the challenges and rewards of their job. Susan (four years in the Park) told me of her delight in seeing a mother badger with two cubs crossing the road near Ham Gate early one morning . . . David (10 years service) saw a muntjac this summer . . . and a tame fox in the Oak Lodge grounds is a familiar sight. A less welcome encounter was with a cobra, apparently an abandoned pet, which had to be expertly captured and removed to London Zoo. Bunches of keys are frequently found: less common discoveries are clothes, bicycles fixed to railings, TV sets and even on one occasion a three-piece suite.

The team have a critical eye for the peculiar behaviour of the public. Why, for instance, do

so many people carefully collect their dog poo in a plastic bag – and then hang the bag on the nearest tree rather than take it to a "doggy bin"? Several extra bins have recently been installed to encourage proper disposal.

What should the Friends, and all who love their Park, do when they see litter? Obviously it is important to avoid handling anything which could cause infection (litter pickers carry a "sharps box" for discarded needles). If such an object, or any large accumulation of litter, is found, the advice is to call Holly



Lodge (020 8948 3209 – leave a message if it's at the weekend) and report the location as precisely as you can. For objects such as cans and bottles, walkers could carry a small plastic bag and pick the item up by the inside of the bag, in the way dog owners do.

When I talked to Park Manager Simon Richards, he commended the litter pickers for the thoroughness of their scavenging. He also referred to another role that they play. Roaming the Park as they do, they act as his "eyes and ears" in reporting any problems, such as for instance a tree that looks about to shed a branch. There is, I now know, a great deal more to the job of litter-picking than I had imagined.

Michael Davison leads walks for the Friends