

## Saving Selsdon Wood – part 2

Last month I started a series to discover more about the core group of the 'Selsdon Wood Preservation Society' who spent over a decade fundraising to save the wood. We have heard about Alice Bonus and her extraordinary family. This month is the turn of Sir Lawrence Wensley Chubb – a lifetime environmentalist.

**Sir Lawrence Wensley Chubb** (21 December 1873 – 18 February 1948) - A nationally famous name and joint Secretary and Treasurer of the Selsdon Wood Preservation Society. He was an Anglo-Australian who migrated to England and in 1891 was working as an auctioneer's clerk and living with an uncle in Southwark. Aged 22 in 1895, he became the first Secretary of the newly formed National Trust (the only paid position in the founding group) and also the Secretary of The Commons and Footpaths Preservation Society (now known as the Open Spaces Society). He was a keen 'rambler'. These country walking clubs had been increasing in popularity since 1880 and he united the London clubs (he belonged to Epping Forest Ramblers) into a newly founded 'London Federation' of Ramblers in 1905. He wrote publicly about rambling as "Pathfinder" in The Star newspaper.

In 1916 in an article to the Journal of The Royal Society of Arts entitled: *"The common lands of London - The Story of Their Preservation"* he argues that the value of commons is such that "they bring to the doors of town-dwellers a message of Nature and a sense of quiet beauty and restfulness which have become essential in these days of strain and stress" (the First World War). "Indeed, it is safe to assert that there are now few persons who cavil (a trivial objection) at the expenditure necessary for the acquisition and maintenance of open spaces, because it has come to be universally realised that a sufficiency of "open air lungs" is only less necessary to the citizen than adequate systems of sewerage, and water-supply."

London air was incredibly polluted with 'smog', new railways were enabling people to move out which is why the suburbs were growing at such a rate. Indeed, the new 'Selsdon/Croham Heights' was being advertised to buyers as 'above the smog line'. That housing expansion brought with it dangers of loss of the countryside.



Through his many contacts in social activism, he would no doubt have been aware of the wonderful work and success of saving land from development made by Croydon's Malcolm G Sharpe (more about him next month) which may be how he became one of the 5 "Selsdon Wood Preservation Society' founders in 1926. This was a long running and successful campaign.

In 1928 he became involved with the new National Playing Fields association (now called Fields in Trust).

[Photo from 1934, Tonbridgehistory.org.uk](http://Tonbridgehistory.org.uk) (I believe Sir Lawrence is far left)

In the 1930s' there was a growing movement to create a 'Green belt' around London in accordance to all that Sir Lawrence had been campaigning for over 3 decades. He was knighted in 1930 for his work.

However, some modern historians have raised a caveat to the many praises due Sir Lawrence. Common people had been fighting for access to walk for recreation (ramble) on private land – more particularly the large areas of heath, moorland, hill and coast 'owned' (often by enclosing 'common land') by a rich minority. The 'Right to Roam' movement had gained momentum and a Labour MP Arthur Creech-Jones proposed a bill in 1938 that would have granted ordinary people access to roam. Sadly, the 'compromises' to the bill for landowners negotiated (behind the scenes without the approval of the Rambling association), by Sir Lawrence (probably at the Government's request) actually had the opposite effect. The bill far from giving more freedom for ordinary people, created more barriers: 'trespass' would have become a criminal offence. The act was unworkable; fortunately, it never came into operation. Sir Lawrence certainly regretted his involvement when the effects became clear. The war intervened and the act was repealed by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. Rights of access to commons and other open country were not won however until the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which again though limited, were better than what went before. (Open Spaces Society History [www.oss.org.uk](http://www.oss.org.uk)).

This is a slightly sad note to end on, but we mustn't forget the wonderful legacy of open spaces fought for and gained by his lifetime's work. No doubt you will have been enjoying the carpets of bluebells seen in recent weeks in Selsdon woods.

If you can help with more information about any of our Selsdon Wood Preservation saviours let us know. Next month Malcolm Grahame Sharpe (no relation to me), Winfred Mary Hudson and Ernest Alfred Earl and the little-known local naturalist, Arthur Beadell.

**Janet Sharp**