

Epping Forest & Commons Committee Dinner

Chairman's Address: Deputy Caroline Haines

Thursday 16th October 2025

Painters' Hall: The Livery Hall

My Lord, Alderman, Honoured Guests

The landscapes and their people that we celebrate tonight —Epping Forest, Burnham Beeches and the Commons—are not just green spaces. They are internationally recognised, ecologically vital, and deeply loved by the communities they serve.

Between them they welcome around 12 million visits annually and, according to our recent Natural Capital Audit, are worth a total of 2 billion pounds to their diverse communities over 50 years.

And as we look ahead to the 150th anniversary of the 1878 Open Spaces and Epping Forest Act, I feel both the weight of responsibility and the excitement of opportunity. The City of London Corporation's decision back in the 19th Century to protect Epping Forest for public recreation and enjoyment was particularly visionary. Our job now is to honour that legacy—and future-proof it.

And this is one of the reasons why I chose Painter Stainers Hall to host our dinner tonight.

I was Mistress Painter Stainer back in 2012-13 and learned many of the secrets these walls could tell if only they could talk!

In fact, one of our guests tonight spoke at our Installation Dinner about three of the paintings in the Palace of Westminster that held special meaning for her: Eleanor – we are so pleased to have you back with us and would like to take this opportunity to thank you for all that you have done over nearly three decades as a fantastic servant of and for Epping Forest.

The Painter Stainers reach back to an organisation of painters of metal and wood back in the 13th Century – the same Century that saw the first protections emerge for our Forests....and one of these walls secrets is that, as you look around, what looks like marble is, in fact, wood....and what looks like wood is, in many cases, metal: both mediums decorated by highly skilled artists preserving the medieval trade of painting and staining much beloved of the Kings and Queens who frequented their London Palaces as an economic and flexible way of updating their built environment – or in the case of Henry VIII, rapidly updating the names of his Queen's!

Wood, ancient, modern and into the future is a shared key theme and is reflected in the place name settings, created by our recently retired Superintendent at the Commons, Geoff Sinclair. Please take both them and the table centres away with you at the end of the evening.

The second open 'secret' is that our great Forest of Epping is a Royal Forest – and hung on these walls is uniquely Royal portraiture.

Why? Because the first hall was donated by Alderman Sir John Browne, Sergeant Painter to Henry VIII in 1552. At the outbreak of the Great Fire in 1666, King Charles II arrived at Queenhithe Steps to meet the Lord Mayor and Aldermen in that hall to try to persuade them to pull down the tightly packed wood and plaster buildings crammed close to the River Thames.

They refused and the City burned....but on its rebuilding Royal portraits were given pre-eminence – and although the hall was subsequently rebuilt to be destroyed again by enemy action in 1942, its last reiteration completed in 1961 continues to preserve the Royal link.....

...as does Epping Forest when, since Henry II in the 12th Century, our Forest has held legal status as a Royal Forest and in the 19th Century, Queen Victoria's son, Arthur, Duke of Connaught, was appointed the first Ranger of the Forest. The Duke of Gloucester celebrated 50 years in that role in 2024.

This speech will largely focus on Epping Forest tonight because for those that are unaware, we celebrated the tremendous work happening across our Commons at Burnham Beeches and the Chancellor's residence, Dorney Wood, last month....

...and knowing our history is critical because it helps us make sense of our understanding of place and the decisions that we need to make to best preserve and conserve for the future whilst still moving forward in uncertain and challenging times.

Partnering us in this challenge is Dr. Neil Hudson, MP for Epping Forest since 2024. Thankyou for joining us tonight, Neil. We look forward to hearing from you later and developing a strong future partnership.

As we approach the 150th anniversary of the City of London Corporation's Open Spaces and Epping Forest Act, our thinking and outcomes will be guided by the **Golden Thread of Accessibility and Protection**.

These principles were embedded in the original Act by our astonishingly forward-thinking forebears who 'protected' the Forest and our Commons for the 'recreation and enjoyment' of the public.

Our **Golden Thread** is to ensure that they remain open, inclusive, and protected for at least the next 150 years.

But let's be honest: the challenges are real.

- **Climate change** is already having a huge impact—more wildfires, droughts, tree disease, and drying water bodies.
- **Development pressures** are growing, with threats to the green belt and rising visitor numbers.
- And we are undergoing a **Charity Review**, which will reshape how we're governed and financed.

But like the Forest itself, we are resilient. We adapt. And we grow stronger.

Here's how we're responding:

1. to enhance Accessibility & Recreation we are

- Launching a **multi-year Path Improvement Programme**
- Developing **Masterplans** for High Beach and Leyton Flats
- Auditing and improving accessibility—physically and digitally
- Rolling out new signage and pre-visit information
- Managing visitors strategically through our **Visitor Management Strategy** and **SAMMS** partnership with local authorities

2. Nature Conservation & Resilience

- Surveying and planning habitat management with **hydrological surveys** and **woodland management plans**
- Expanding the **Ancient & Veteran Tree Register**
- Responding to wildfires and anti-social behaviour through multi-agency collaboration

3. In the sphere of Culture, Heritage & Learning

- Submitting a major grant application for **Wanstead Park** and working to remove the Grotto from the Heritage at Risk Register
- Launching a **Heritage Feature Management Review** informed by the Forest wide LIDAR survey, with over 50 volunteers helping uncover our archaeological treasuresand we are also....
- Exploring future **World Heritage Site** potential

4. And around Community Engagement

- Embedding programmes like **SAMMS Ambassadors**, **education partnerships**, and **volunteering teams**
- And beginning to plan the celebrations for the 150th Anniversary around a series of public events and community-led initiatives

This all takes people power and financial sustainability.

We've recruited 40% new staff in the past 18 months—a challenge, yes, but also a huge opportunity. I've been genuinely inspired by the knowledge, passion, and fresh energy they bring.

They're already making a real difference on the ground under the outstanding leadership of our first female Superintendent, Jacqueline, who ran a really successful interactive Meet and Greet at the Canopy in the Warren last month.

On behalf of the whole committee I extend my thanks to every individual who makes up our operational and management teams. We 'see you' and appreciate your commitment and dedication.

We're also ensuring that our charity is financially stable, exploring opportunities to fundraise, earn income and ensure our assets, like our residential lodges, are let quickly to generate income for the charity—because even ancient woodlands need modern business plans.

Epping Forest and the Commons are not just landscapes. They are living legacies—places of peace, play, and purpose so as we look ahead to the 150th anniversary, we do so with pride, with purpose, and with a deep commitment to ensuring these spaces remain **accessible**, **protected**, and **cherished** for generations to come.

I would like to close with a quote from an essay titled 'Our Beautiful Earth' written by Daisaku Ikeda in 2000 and given to all 200 delegates who attended our June International Veteran Tree Conference at Taplow Court and Burnham Beeches and which captures the essence of the importance of wood and of what we do:

Nothing is more deserving of praise than a tree that has endured.

Beauty approaching divinity.

Without confusion or hesitation, proud, majestic, the tree lives life as it is, true to itself.

A tree is a bridge that connects heaven and earth....a living antenna by which the earth converses with the cosmos.

In the growth rings of the oak are engraved a history of all its hardships, all its struggles and all its glorious triumphs

The tree says: this is my place: it is here that I have struggled and won. Could there be any greater place than this?

Thank you.