“The Scrubs” is the colloquial name for Wormwood Scrubs in west London. Mention the Scrubs to most people and they think of Wormwood Scrubs prison. But to many others, the Scrubs is the precious open space behind the prison, a wonderful wilderness of wild vegetation and woodland, juxtaposed with swathes of grass, sports pitches and the Linford Christie sports stadium. Comprising some 70 hectares, it is enjoyed for walking, sport and all kinds of other recreation. It provides excellent habitat for a surprising variety of birdlife.

“Wormwood” is a corruption of “Wormholt” and until the nineteenth century the Scrubs was known as “Wormholt Scrubs” or “Wormholt Common”, “holt” meaning a wood, although much of the woodland had been cleared by the early seventeen hundreds. At that time the Scrubs was owned by the Bishop of London as it had been for several previous centuries. The land was leased to a succession of tenants in addition to which several farmers enjoyed rights of common for the pasture of their cattle and pigs. Originally it stretched north to Harrow Road and east to include what is now Little Wormwood Scrubs but, with the completion of the Paddington Branch of the Grand Union Canal in 1801, the London and Birmingham Railway in 1837 and the Great Western Line in 1838, the northernmost part was lost. The West London Railway, opened in 1844, cut it off from Little Wormwood Scrubs. By the 1840’s the Ecclesiastical Commissioners had succeeded the Bishop of London as the effective freeholder of the Scrubs.

Old Oak Common extended over the present north western corner of the Scrubs and land to the north on the western side, much of it currently covered by railway lines and sidings. “Acton”, since 1965 part of the London Borough of Ealing, derives from the Anglo-Saxon meaning “oak farm”.

In 1812 the Government acquired a lease of most of the Scrubs for the purpose of training troops and the exercise of their horses and undertook extensive drainage; in 1878 it purchased the land outright. In 1859 a number of volunteer forces were established and those in Fulham and Hammersmith had the use of rifle ranges on land which is now the Linford Christie Stadium. In the 1880’s the rifle butts were rebuilt, parts of which are still standing to the west of the Stadium. The Pavilion pub at the junction of North Pole Road and Scrubs Lane was originally the Rifle Pavilion Public House.

1879 saw the birth of the “modern” era of the Scrubs with the passing of the Wormwood Scrubs Act. This Act established the boundary of the Scrubs and formalised the arrangements for the use of the Scrubs by military and public. The north west boundary ran along the line of Stamford Brook (now underground) on the other (western) side of which was Old Oak Common. This triangle of land later became part of the Scrubs but is still shown on several maps as part of Old Oak Common. The Scrubs was transferred to the Metropolitan Board of Works (the predecessor of the LCC) and, with successive changes in the governance of London, to the LCC, the GLC and finally, in 1986, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (“LBHF”). The Board of Works was to hold the Scrubs on trust to be used for military purposes and, subject to these, for its “perpetual use by the inhabitants of the metropolis for exercise and recreation”. No permanent building (except rifle butts) was to be constructed on the Scrubs without the consent of the Board of Works and the Secretary of State for War (now Defence). The Board of Works was further empowered to drain, level and improve the Scrubs with the consent of the same Secretary of State. The Act remains in force and provides vital protection for the benefit of the users of the Scrubs. The current trustee is LBHF: the Wormwood Scrubs Charitable Trust committee, consisting of councillors assisted by council officers, is responsible for the enforcement of the Act and management of the Scrubs.

The Scrubs featured in the pioneering days of aviation. In 1909 the Scrubs was home to some airships and in 1910 was the airfield chosen by a competitor in a race for aircraft from London to Manchester. During World War I airships and aircraft were kept in hangars on the Scrubs which was also used for the training of servicemen. In World War II anti-aircraft guns were in action on the Scrubs. In 1945 there was the first of a series of football matches on the Scrubs between German prisoners of war from a neighbouring camp and a local side (the locals won 5-1). Football has been played on the Scrubs at least since the nineteenth century.

The West London Stadium, on the south of the Scrubs and north of the hospitals, home of the Thames Valley Harriers, was opened in 1967 and renamed the Linford Christie Stadium in 1993 after the club’s best-known athlete. The Wormwood Scrubs Pony Centre, founded in 1989, is to the east of the Stadium. A part of the Scrubs is also used by model aircraft flyers. There are two play areas for children on the Scrubs.

On the north western side of the Scrubs, very cheap accommodation in the shape of Tent City was opened by Christian Action in 1971. It ceased however to be managed by Christian Action and closed in the late 1990’s.

The Channel Tunnel Act 1987 signalled more changes to the Scrubs with the building of sidings and stabling sheds for Eurostar trains on Old Oak Common immediately north of the Scrubs boundary. For some years prior to this, this land, owned by British Rail, had become overgrown and a haven for wildlife. The area was known as “Scrubs Wood”. An energetic campaign to save Scrubs Wood was led by Lester Holloway, then a schoolboy and later a LBHF councillor. The wood was not saved but British Rail did provide support for remedial work on the northern edge of the Scrubs. The embankment which runs halfway along the northern boundary from the western end was built largely with spoil from Old Oak Common excavations and became known as “Lester’s Embankment”. To the east of the embankment, fresh woodland (funded in part by LBHF) was planted by volunteers and called “Chats’ Paddock” - soil, vegetation and a colony of common lizards being carried there from Scrubs Wood. Eurostar used its depot on Old Oak Common from 1994 to 2007 when its operation moved to St Pancras station, but the site is still used for the maintenance of Intercity trains. Mainline routes continue to cross Old Oak Common.

In 2002 parts of the Scrubs were declared by LBHF to be a Local Nature Reserve (“LNR”). The LNR covers most of the perimeter of the Scrubs, including the whole of the embankment and woodland on the northern boundary, and Central Copse (the wood in the middle of the Scrubs). The Scrubs is also designated Metropolitan Open Land which provides protection from development and is further protected by (among other statutes) the Commons Act 2006 in addition to the Wormwood Scrubs Act of 1879. In 2011, as part of its Core Strategy (for planning purposes), LBHF proposed the removal of Linford Christie Stadium from MOL status but, in the face of objection principally from the Friends of the Scrubs, the Inspector appointed to examine the Strategy reported against the proposal. The Stadium remains part of the Scrubs MOL.

The military continued to use the Scrubs, most recently for the exercise and training of the horses of the King’s Troop Royal Horse Artillery when their barracks was in St Johns Wood. However when the Troop moved to Woolwich at the beginning of 2012 they ceased to use the Scrubs. The military retains the right under the 1879 Act to its use of the Scrubs.

An association of users of the Scrubs known as the Friends of the Scrubs was formed in 1998 for the protection and conservation of the Scrubs in accordance with the 1879 Act. The most recent potential threat to the Scrubs comes from plans related to the proposed HS2 and Queen Elizabeth Line (Crossrail) station on Old Oak Common, just north of the Scrubs, although this station would not itself encroach on the Scrubs. At one time Transport for London proposed a London Overground link to the station that would have passed over part of the north of the Scrubs by means of a viaduct. In the face of substantial opposition from the Friends and others this proposal was not pursued and the siting of a new Overground station in Old Oak Common Lane will not involve any new line affecting the Scrubs. The HS2/Crossrail station was however the catalyst for the creation in 2015 of the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (“OPDC”) which, after some controversy, included the Scrubs within its boundary. The OPDC’s Draft Local Plan, first published in 2016, includes ambitious plans for the creation of jobs and homes on Old Oak Common north of the Scrubs and beyond. The Plan has had a difficult passage chiefly owing to the loss of the large Car Giant site for development north of the Canal which has meant a substantial reduction in the scope of building envisaged by the OPDC. This in turn may have reduced the pressure for access to the Scrubs from the north (of which there is currently none), access that the Friends and Charitable Trust have viewed with concern. At the time of writing the Local Plan is bound

to undergo revision and its date of adoption is uncertain.

The Friends and Charitable Trust will have to remain vigilant to ensure the integrity of an open space treasured for being “more wild than tamed”.

D J 5 March 2020