

The Friends of Whirlow Brook Park Chair's Annual Report April 2021-March 2022

This is the first annual report of the Friends of Whirlow Brook Park. Unlike most of the other parks and open spaces in Sheffield, Whirlow Brook had never had a Friends Group. In 2010 Sheffield u3a were permitted to adopt the area around the upper pond in order to create a commemorative garden, but the rest of the park became increasingly neglected due to lack of Council resources. In the early spring of 2021, with the support of officers from the Council's Parks and Countryside Department (P and C), Shelagh Woolliscroft convened a steering group, following which the Friends of Whirlow Brook Park was constituted at a general meeting held in September 2021.

The period between May and September 2021 was a busy one. We were helped enormously by support from the u3a gardening group who cheerfully allowed us to share their tools, equipment and their mess room in the undercroft of the Hall. Other Friends groups and Paul Campbell, the Chair of the Green Spaces Forum, gave us very useful advice. The steering group members volunteered for roles as follows: Chris Cave organised our banking arrangements, Roger Lasko drafted a constitution and David Jordan created a website and membership application form. Maggie Girling created a logo, publicised us on social media and started a regular newsletter for Friends and volunteers. John Coldron agreed to lead a construction and maintenance team. Bridget Tattersall kindly agreed to be our health and safety adviser. Relying on our own skills and experience meant that setting up the group cost very little money.

At the General Meeting on 28 September Shelagh, Roger, Chris, Maggie, David and John were elected to the management committee and at the first meeting of the committee it was agreed to allocate the key roles as follows

Shelagh - Chair

Roger - Secretary

Chris - Treasurer

Maggie - Publicity Officer

David - Membership Records Officer and Web Master

John - Team Leader, Construction and Maintenance.

Other lead roles - volunteer organiser, fund raiser, events team leader, were shared out amongst us on the assumption that others would join the committee at a future date. We were pleased to co-opt Nick Goffin onto the committee in October - since when Nick has been involved with two successful fund-raising bids.

The Steering group had felt that it important to find out what park users wanted. Despite the restrictions imposed by Covid 19 we managed to hold a consultation event on 19 May, which 90 people attended. 70 completed a questionnaire about their use of the park; what they most appreciated about it and what aspects they would like improved. Responses indicated that it was the tranquility of the park, the beautiful trees and surrounding countryside which appealed most. Top of the list of 'wants' were a cafe with toilets, improvements to the lower pond, better care of the trees and shrubs, more herbaceous planting, the overhaul of the former rose gardens, something done about the muddy footpaths by the Limb Brook and more provision for young children. We compiled a two year plan which took account of these priorities.

Equally important was to understand what Andy Mumford, Area Parks Manager for South Sheffield, considered to be priorities. Working with friends of parks groups is an added challenge for Council managers, especially when the volunteers are new and untested. Andy suggested that we start with the former lower rose garden: the soil was no longer able to support roses and the garden needed a complete re-design.

It was clear that we were going to need a lot of help from the community in order to start making a difference. It was heartening to see many people signing up as gardening volunteers at the May consultation event and later at the September general meeting. Having considered people's availability it was decided to run two morning sessions per month, one of which would be on a Saturday. The first session was held on Wednesday 26 May and after a short health and safety briefing by Ranger Graham Lister the volunteers started weeding and clearing debris. Clearing the former rose garden (now called the sunken garden) took many sessions. Enormous quantities of bramble, nettle and other weeds were cleared and much pruning undertaken. Two over-large conifers were removed to allow more light in and others were crown-lifted. The nine small beds were reduced to two large symmetrical ones. Andy Mumford put together a planting plan based on our ideas for a scented garden and ordered the plants for us which avoided our having to pay VAT. The Hallamshire branch of the Soroptimists gave a very generous donation which enabled five new trees to be planted and another donor gave a handsome sum which paid for the central beds. Planting took place in March and April 2022, with a generous application of bark mulch keeping the weeds down. Overall nearly 200 plants have been put in and P and C's gardening team have re-seeded the grass. We look forward to completing the garden as funds permit.

Other activity during the year included removing Himalayan balsam from the Limb Brook; clearing the young children's play area including repainting the maze; clearing the margins of the lower pond (a joint exercise with Abbeydale Rotary and the Su3A gardening team); hard pruning a huge bank of cornus; and planting 3000 spring bulbs. In addition, John Coldron's construction and maintenance team conducted a survey of the paving and stone work. The walls at the foot of the steps leading to the sunken garden were rebuilt to accommodate the new junipers and some of the steps relaid.

The work of the group has been helped by many other organisations and individuals. Local councillors have been very supportive and Colin Ross kindly chaired both the inaugural General Meeting and the Climate Change launch (see below). Maggie contacted the University, with the result that most gardening sessions are now attended by students whose energy and strength are much appreciated! Ranger Grahame Lister helped the construction team to replace the dilapidated fence by the top car park with a new post and rail fence. The Tree Council gave us a grant for a copper beech hedge to run along the inside of the fence and also paid for two silver birch trees in the sunken garden. The South West Sheffield People Keeping Well Partnership gave a grant towards a multi tool for sanding the benches, and a much needed hose-pipe with a wheeled cart. Vine Hotels have kindly allowed the management Committee to meet at the Hall and have given a grant towards the restoration and upkeep of the area around the Hall. We hope this will be an annual donation!

We are not short of ideas to make the park more interesting and attractive. We met with tree manager Jerry Gunson who agreed to help us to create a tree trail; and with Denise Devoto of the new SW Local Area Committee to consider a compost making education project. We will need to apply for Ward pot funding for both these projects. On a warm sunny day in April 2022 an Easter Egg trail attracted a large number of families. This event was sponsored by the Coop who kindly donated the prizes of Cadbury's creme eggs. The attractive (and reusable) egg signs were painted by Nether Edge Art Group. Visitors also consumed large quantities of Hope Valley ice-cream, which gave rise to a plan to set up Ice Cream Sundays during the summer.

Our major project, which was launched on 12 March 2022, is concerned with tackling the effects of climate change. During the autumn of 2021, with enormous help from environmentalist Professor Ian Rotherham and his colleague in the South Yorkshire Bio-diversity group, Christine Handley, we successfully bid for a grant of £8,500 from the Lottery Community Fund's 'Together

for our Planet' initiative. Olivia Blake MP kindly agreed to be our keynote speaker at the launch event on 12 March 2022. This project involves the local community and others in learning about and surveying all aspects of bio-diversity in the Park - to create a base line against which we can plot future change. It will give us the basis of a master plan for the next 10 years. An associated donation from Bluebell Energy allowed us to purchase a weather station.

Two other initiatives have a bearing on this project: a series of flood alleviation measures being installed in the catchment of the Limb Brook above the park (we learned about this from Leo Ingvorsen and Dr Kevin Spence at the launch); and the replacement of the larch plantation, which the Forestry Commission required to be felled over the winter of 2021-22 because of disease. The devastation caused by the felling has caused much distress to both local people and walkers; but we plan to help P and C to replant the area with native species. This is scheduled for winter 2022/3 and it is hoped that within a few years we shall have a new woodland which will encourage much needed bio-diversity.

During the lockdown of early 2021 we began to explore the history of the park and the family who owned the house called Whirlow Brook. As a result we were able to trace the great grandson of Sir Walter and Lady Lily Marguerite (Madge) Benton Jones (nee Fawcett). Sir Jamie Benton Jones is the fifth baronet and lives at the family seat, Irnham Hall, near Grantham. He came across to Sheffield on 23 June 2021, accompanied by his mother Lady Margaret, and assisted the Lord Mayor of Sheffield, Councillor Gail Smith, in formally opening the 'Onion', an outdoor shelter built in the Su3a Commemorative Garden. (The shelter had been funded by generous donations from Su3a members, together with a grant from the Sheffield Town Trust.) The event gave us the opportunity to launch the Friends Group and Sir Jamie kindly agreed to be a patron. A complimentary afternoon tea was provided by Vine Hotels. We now have an active history team continuing the research work into the Fawcett and Benton Jones families; great progress has been made and there will be a display of our findings at our first AGM.

A report on the Park would not be complete without a reference to the long-awaited cafe and toilets! Despite Covid19, negotiations between staff of P and C's Better Parks Team and a prospective tenant continued during the year and are likely to reach a successful conclusion by the end of the summer. We certainly hope so - the park has been without a cafe and public toilets since 2013 and this is a major deterrent to visitors. The management committee have also been involved in discussions about the future use of the compound beyond the upper car park - this space will go out to tender later in 2022 with a view to seeking an organisation with aims that are compatible with our own.

To conclude, it has been an exciting roller coaster of a year and one we can all be proud of. The result goes to show what can be achieved if enough people believe in the cause. None of it would have happened without the commitment of our volunteers, the generosity of our donors and the skills of our management team. My grateful thanks go to them all.

Shelagh Woolliscroft
Chair of the Friends of Whirlow Brook Park
May 2022