

Friends of Whirlow Brook Park

Chair's Report for the year ended 31 March 2023

This report covers the period April 2022 - March 2023. It was a very busy year for the Friends Group, during which we increased our understanding of what is needed to 'future-proof' the park. We also raised awareness, built up membership support, maintained the gardening work begun in our first year, completed several projects and started to shape a ten-year strategic plan.

Membership

The management team was reduced from seven to six during the year, but was otherwise stable and very hard-working. The number of Friends increased to 103 and the number of regular volunteers has also increased, with several now willing to share the lead on aspects like fund-raising events and nature recording.

Spreading the Word

Members have been kept abreast of developments via quarterly newsletters. Our website also carries news about recent achievements and future events.

We ran our first open event during the September 2022 Heritage Week. This resulted in many invitations to talk to local groups. We were also given a slot on Radio Sheffield's 'The Grow Show'. Relationships with the two universities are good and we now welcome student volunteers at most of our Saturday sessions.

Our Facebook following of 664 and Twitter following of 154 suggests that we are now reaching an audience outside of the immediate geographical area. However a great many Sheffield residents are still unaware that the park exists or believe that it is no longer a public park. Signage for both the park and the forthcoming cafe on Ecclesall Road South/Hathersage Road is badly needed.

Many useful contacts were made during the year, including with the Wildlife Trust, the Sheaf and Porter Rivers Trust, the River Stewardship company, Kids Plant Trees, South Yorkshire Bat Group, the Sorby Society and Greenhill scouts.

Income and Expenditure

Our regular income from subscriptions supports essential expenditure such as publicity, the website, and insurance. We are fortunate in being able to minimise costs by having access to free storage facilities and the use of the Hall for important events.

As the accounts show, the main expenditure in 2022-23 has been on the Climate Action project funded in March 2022 by the National Lottery Community Fund (Together for our Planet).

The main sources of income have been from fund-raising events, together with some very helpful small grants which have enabled other projects.

However, any large-scale restoration project, such as the de-silting of the lower pond, will require funding from e.g the Heritage Lottery and we are steadily building up the evidence, together with the necessary knowledge and expertise to support such a bid.

We gratefully received several donations, both from individuals and groups like Trail 10, who run through the park and woodland twice a year.

Of course our resources lie in our volunteers as much as in our bank account! If we were to cost the number of person-hours spent at £10 per hour it would come to well over £15,000 per annum. This volunteer labour is critical - without it the park would still be looking neglected and we would not have the ideas which help to shape our plans.

Charitable Status

Following the decision at last year's AGM that FoWP should apply for charitable status, a new constitution was drafted. This was approved nem con at an Extraordinary General Meeting held on 3 December 2022. After gathering various supportive documents an application to the Charity Commission was made in February 2023 and at the time of writing the outcome is eagerly awaited. Charitable status would increase the funding opportunities open to us, as well as allowing us to claim gift aid on subscriptions and small donations.

Gardening and Landscaping

We ran twice-monthly gardening sessions throughout the year. The gardening volunteers planted the sunken garden and kept it weeded and watered during the prolonged heatwave of June and July. Despite our efforts, some of the planting suffered and will need to be replaced. We also cleared and replanted much of the horseshoe-shaped bed near the children's maze. There is a drainage issue here which is under investigation. The second bank of dogwood was cut back in spring 2023, taking several sessions to remove more than twenty years' growth. Material was used to start a 'dead hedge'

During the winter of 22/23 volunteers helped to plant native species to replace the former larch plantation. It remains to be seen what effect the tree planting will have on the springs which flow into the park.

With the corporate donation from Vine Hotels we maintained the hanging baskets and the large planters on the terrace: we also purchased plants for the bed under the kitchen windows and the narrow side bed which runs along the west side of the house. The soil preparation and planting of the latter was undertaken by staff from Aviva during a very successful corporate team-building day: they also helped to re-coat some benches. One session was devoted to an overgrown border between the house and the woodland: this was cleared to reveal a flagged path and derelict herbaceous border.

The Su3a garden has looked good all year under Anne Johnson's enthusiastic leadership. Many of the older rhododendrons in the rock garden fell victim to the heavy snow in March and had to be cut back to the base: they will almost certainly grow back but meanwhile this has brought light into this area, opening up new vistas across the pond. The pond level was higher than usual in April despite leaking badly; at the time of writing the springs are still running. Other areas of the park seem wetter than usual too, could this be connected to the felling of the larch plantation or just the result of a particularly wet spring?

Two productive joint sessions on the ponds were held with Sheffield University of the Third Age (Su3a) and Abbeydale Rotary. The silt trap leading to the lower pond was cleaned out and a large amount of organic matter removed. In summer 2022 the parks team dealt with a fallen tree which was causing a leak from the lower pond and FoWP cleaned out the drain in the lower car park at the same time. Result: the pond no longer leaks and the car park is dry.

A bug hotel was installed by the steps leading down from the sunken garden and will form a stopping point on the proposed young children's trail. Ranger Grahame Lister helped us with two other projects - a set of composting bays and an extension to the boardwalk on the footpath which leads to the Limb Brook. Both projects were made possible because of grants from the Council's South West Sheffield Local Area Committee (SWLAC). Grahame retired at the end of March but we are confident that ranger support will continue.

The Climate Action Project

This was a major focus for the year under review. Having launched the project in February 2022, the majority of the summer and autumn of that year was taken up with walkovers and surveys in order to establish a base-line for future comparison and to determine what action might be taken to increase biodiversity and improve habitats. Members were invited to comment on the findings during the autumn, after which Ian Rotherham and Christine Handley presented a final report, together with an action plan. Their wide-ranging report was accepted by the management committee: action points are now being incorporated into a ten-year strategic plan encompassing all aspects of FoWP's work. The action points also feature in our operating plan for 2023-4.

Sincere thanks are due to Ian and Christine for all their hard work and expertise, without which we would not have known where to start. We are very grateful to have had this project early on in the life of the Friends Group because it has given us both a meaningful context for our work and also a basis for future plans.

The Tree Trail Project

This project, again funded by the South West LAC, was progressed during the year and is a fine example of teamwork between FoWP and the Council's Parks and Countryside service. Over 30 species of tree have been identified and a small volunteer team has produced a short description for each one. Each of the trees will have a post adjacent to it bearing a QR code and the name of the tree. The QR code will lead to the relevant page on the FoWP website. Some of the chosen trees were difficult to access or obscured by vegetation and this has necessitated some scrub clearance. The trail is to be launched by the Lord Mayor, Cllr Colin Ross, on 9 June 2023. Despite costs escalating during the year the trail will have been achieved for about £1000 (excluding staff time and volunteer labour).

Fund-raising Events

In 2022 we raised funds for both the sunken garden and bat boxes. We raised enough for seven boxes and the South Yorkshire Bat Group donated a further eight. All were put up in March 2023.

Some fund-raisers have become enjoyable annual events - these include the Easter egg hunt and the plant fair. The four music evenings were well attended, given that publicity was limited due to lack of proper facilities. Bands kindly play for expenses only and audiences are equally generous. Current plans include running craft activities during the summer holidays.

In anticipation of the cafe opening we successfully bid to the People Keeping Well Partnership for a grant of £191 for bird-feeders.

In 2023 our fund-raising focus is nature-based play activity for young children. We have started to design a children's trail, comprising a mix of physical activity, creativity and learning about nature. A number of ideas are currently being tested.

History and Archeology

Our historical research continued, particularly into the extended Fawcett and Dixon families. We enjoy keeping in touch with our patron Sir Jamie Benton Jones; with Andrew Renwick, great-nephew of Madge; and with Christine Morgan, housekeeper at Whirlow Court, Madge's childhood home.

Dr Jan Woudstra, lecturer in landscape history at the University of Sheffield has provided compelling evidence that the park is of both local and regional significance. He writes: 'The estate is a remarkable survivor of a garden of a little-studied era. The fact that it has survived with its

surface intact and provides so much evidence of the historical development of Sheffield, including a lengthy history of public access, means that Whirlow Brook is a highly valuable asset’.

We were delighted when Oliver Jessop of TJC Heritage offered to produce, ‘pro bono’, a landscape survey and archeological report. The report is now available and will add significantly to the evidence needed to support future funding claims. Oliver concludes that ‘The gardens are considered to possess a regional heritage significance deriving from: their architectural interest as a good example of a relatively unaltered early 20th century garden, with much of the original planting being very established and now reaching maturity; the development of the site as a single phase layout, associated with a single family with upper middle class values and aspirations; and the archaeological interest deriving from the surviving built infrastructure and potential survival of earlier industrial features along the Limb Brook. In addition, the wider landscape setting is considered to be of regional significance due to its age, and legibility of previous layers of use in defining a valued aspect of local historic landscape character.’

Conclusion

With the climate action report, the landscape survey/archeological report, plus our own knowledge gained over the year we are now in a position to plan ahead with confidence. With the support of our fantastic volunteers and our many colleagues in the Parks and Countryside Service we will produce a ten-year plan which puts Whirlow Brook on the regional map and safeguards it for future generations to enjoy.

Shelagh Woolliscroft. 19 May 2023