

Friends of Whirlow Brook Park

Trustees' Report for the year ended 31 March 2026

Our Friends' Group is well and truly on the map! We are being recognised and valued for the contribution we can make, not only to the important week by week gardening and maintenance work but also in forward planning. We have earned the trust of the Parks and Countryside management team and towards the end of the year discussions started on larger projects, to be regarded as joint ventures with the City Council. This partnership approach is vital, for although we have a wealth of knowledge about the park and its usage and can help to raise much needed funds, it is the Council who have the expertise in planning and managing significant changes. With the support of their experienced senior team we can look forward to being able to safeguard the future of the park, the water features and the woodlands for years to come.

Governance and Management

Chris Cave, Roger Lasko and Shelagh Woolliscroft continued to act as the three trustees. The management team remained strong and stable. Chris Cave handled all financial matters. Roger Lasko acted as Secretary and took a lead role with regard to water management and heritage. Maggie Girling took on overall responsibility for events in addition to marketing and publicity. Nick Goffin continued to oversee the planning process and the programme of repairs and maintenance. David Jordan organised membership, maintained the website and took on responsibility for tree matters. Barry Wiles joined the team in the new role of Volunteer Coordinator.

We are still searching for someone to take the lead on ecology, particularly the organisation and recording of nature surveys. We are also seeking someone to relieve David of the role of membership secretary and someone to take over the coordination of repairs and maintenance.

FOWP is now registered with the Funding Regulator. We have initiated DBS checks for those leading volunteer sessions in order to comply with safeguarding requirements.

Finance

As the accounts show we continue to fund ongoing gardening and maintenance work from a relatively modest budget, thanks to the ingenuity and in-kind contributions of our volunteers. In addition we have been successful in obtaining grants from Sheffield LAC, our corporate sponsors and others which have enabled small projects to be undertaken. The accounts also show that we have acquired assets of £45,000 in the five years since the group was started. Some £25,000 of this is down to two large donations from individuals, with the remainder being built up from fund-raising events. We intend to contribute up to £5,000 towards the re-landscaping of the woodland area behind the house. Consideration is being given to the purchase of a polytunnel. And we intend to draw on these assets in order to fund the badly-needed direction sign on the A625. However, for the most part these funds are earmarked for significantly larger projects where we are likely to be required to match-fund or pay up front before grant funds are released. Such projects would enable the desilting and repair of the ornamental ponds, the repair of the cascades on the Limb Brook and maybe the repurposing of the old stone cottage in the compound.

The Heritage Assets

With the repair and desilting of the ponds in mind we sought advice from a number of people. We struck gold when a water engineer with extensive experience of historic ponds visited us and was hugely impressed by the water systems in the rock garden and the

'cascade' on the Limb Brook. As a result the park has excited the attention of Historic England, who have encouraged us to apply to be added to the National Heritage List. We met with a former chair of Whinfell Quarry Gardens in order to explore the possible negative implications of being listed (there are none), and struck gold again when he produced further evidence that the rock garden was designed and installed by the famous Backhouse of York nursery.

We believe that inclusion in the National Heritage List would help future funding bids. We have gained Council support and intend to apply in the autumn of 2026.

The Tree Survey and Tree Management

Before starting to work with Parks and Countryside on preparing a tree management programme we needed to know more about the Park's tree canopy. With financial support from the Graves Trust we were able to commission Weddles to carry out a survey of 284 trees during the autumn of 2025; and we received a preliminary report in March 2026. We now know the species, approximate age, life expectancy and condition of each tree. Under the CAVAT tree valuation system the total value of these trees is over £15 million. There are some very fine specimens and we are currently determining which of them should be added to the tree trail. Next year we will work with Jerry Gunton's team in Parks and Countryside to develop an annual programme of tree surgery or replacement.

Water Management and the Woodland Belt Project

Parks and Countryside are now well aware of the need to protect the park from flash flooding. Jon Dallow and his Woodlands team are committed to the creation of small ponds and scrapes in the belt of woodland behind the hall. The necessary surveys are in progress and, subject to financial help from FoWP, work may start as early as Autumn 2026. This is a rocky, therefore a challenging site, with some fallen timber to be removed, but it presents the opportunity for a pleasing re-design which will reflect the original layout whilst hopefully creating a new pond capable of sustaining wildlife. We will also be able to repair the boundary fence.

The Wildlife Trust are still at the development stage of their 'Connecting Limbs' project, and it remains to be seen whether there is to be other flood alleviation work in the former larch plantation.

The Community Orchard

This was the second year of our major project. During the very dry summer of 2025 the sponsored fruit trees needed regular watering and we were most grateful for the water tank and a regular supply of water from our neighbours at Overbrook House. The trees, together with the first section of the new native hedgerow, are all doing well and produced some lovely blossom this spring. In November we were able to remove the remainder of the cupressus and extend the hedge to its full length. The 60 metre trench was dug by the Community Payback team, and the hedge whips were planted by both the Ecclesall scouts, and members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association (AMYA). Some standard fruit trees such as almond and cherry were also planted, thanks to a grant from the Tree Council. Volunteers from Gripple extended the boundary fence for us.

Afterwards the maintenance team created two large raised beds where raspberries and blackcurrants have been planted; and more fruit bushes were put along the woodland edge. A handsome new wooden entrance gateway was fashioned with refurbished estate fencing alongside. The orchard is being designed on permaculture grounds - as far as possible it will be a closed loop system with minimal soil disturbance and maximum use of the space for food growing. However we shall need to remove the invasive lamium and the remains of the bramble and nettle.

Herbs and Healing Plants Project

Ten volunteers expressed interest in learning more about herbs and healing plants with a view to including many of these in the orchard.

Some hedgerow plants have already been put in and a dry bed is being created for Mediterranean herbs. Medical Herbalist Sue Pitt has been advising the group and will be on hand at the Orchard Open Morning in June.

Events

Our key fund-raising events continued to be the Easter Egg Hunt, the Plant Sale and the five summer concerts. We also held a cornus weaving event, supplied planters and games for the VE Day celebrations based on the cafe, organised four nature surveys, a number of Heritage walks and held the usual Christmas carol-singing event in the Hall. The proceeds of a benefit concert organised by Mike and Kathleen Cox were shared between FoWP and Friends of Whinfell Quarry Gardens.

We continue to be grateful to Tom Smith and his Vine Hotels team for allowing us to use the Hall for a number of our events.

Presentation of the King's Award for Voluntary Service (KAVS)

We were amazed and delighted when the news came in November that we had been selected to receive the prestigious KAVS award. We were even more amazed when we learned that we were one of only four organisations in South Yorkshire to do so. The award (a beautiful piece of crystal) was presented to us on 11 February by the Lord Lieutenant of South Yorkshire, Dame Hilary Chapman. Dame Hilary was able to meet those who nominated us and also talk to many of the regular volunteers. Presentations about our achievements to date lined the walls and were viewed over coffee and cake. Dame Hilary expressed the wish for an opportunity to tour the park and this has been arranged for June.

Repairs and Maintenance

A programme of repairs was drawn up with the Area Parks Manager and much was achieved, including the levelling of paving in the rock garden to reduce trip hazards, extending the fence along the side of the top car park, painting the pedestrian gates at the park entrance, repainting the benches and installing a new wash hand-basin in the gardeners' toilet. A new handrail was fitted to the steps leading out of the lower car-park, thanks to our patron Andrew Renwick. A sculpture of the Three Bears, commissioned with part of the grant from the Town Trust, was installed by the children's maze, and Andrew contributed Percy Frog, which he had made in his forge, and which has been fixed nearby. These sculptures are to be formally unveiled in May by Hugh Facey, chairman of Gripple, our corporate sponsors.

Two barn owl boxes were installed on conifers close to the southern boundary and the first occupiers are eagerly awaited.

We are very grateful for the skills of those volunteers whose help with repairs and maintenance help both to improve the appearance of the park and to address health and safety concerns.

Other ongoing maintenance work included the review of our trail signs and leaflets, the restocking of bird-feeders, and the clearing of drains.

Work in the Gardens

The number of regular gardening volunteers remained stable during the year and the number of school students working for their Duke of Edinburgh's award rose to five. We appreciate the enthusiasm and in some cases the physical strength of all our student helpers!

Parks and Countryside appointed a new team leader, with whom we now have an excellent relationship. Hedges and lawns were cut to a high standard, compost, grit and bark mulch were supplied on demand and rubbish disposed of promptly. The no-mow area was increased by agreement and we hope for a better showing of meadow plants in future.

Planting additions to the formal beds have increased their attractiveness. We are learning to adjust the planting to the boggy areas. Fallen branches were removed to make dead hedges and cornus stems pruned to make plant supports. Corporate volunteers helped with several tasks, including the barrowing of bark mulch down to the path through the bird copse. During the year we cleared and replanted a section of the 'loop bed' near to the park entrance, thereby greatly improving its appearance.

Cooperation with Others

We enjoyed a close working relationship with the Su3a group who look after the commemorative garden and held a joint session clearing the pond margins. Health and safety training for working in/near water is being organised for Summer 2026

We continued to attend meetings of the SW Local Area Committee, the Whirlow Brook User Group and the Green Spaces Forum. An application was submitted for a brown tourist sign, and the cost of installation is to be shared with the Council, and the Friends of Whinfell. A final decision is subject to improvements in the form of parking for blue-badge holders and cyclists. Roots and Bloom have yet to receive approval for their plans in respect of the compound.

Conclusion

The Trustees extend sincere thanks to the management team, the volunteers, the Friends and everyone who has supported us during 2025-26. It was a very exciting year with no let-up in momentum and with the Kings Award being, almost literally, the icing on the cake! The award has increased our confidence and our determination to carry on restoring and maintaining this lovely jewel in Sheffield's crown.

Shelagh Woolliscroft
12 May 2026