

Friends of South Norwood Country Park, AGM

11am, 26/2/22

Held online, on Zoom. Details were available in advance from the Secretary on friendsofsncp@gmail.com

We opened the Zoom call at 10:50am.

There were 17 people gathered on the call: committee members Sue, Chris P, Chris C, Ian, Leonie, Sundeep, Will and Jonathan (with apologies from Norman) and 9 others, including Emma Guthrie from the Friends of South Norwood Lakes, who joined to learn more about our work, and Lucy Hopkinson from the Friends of Ryelands who have an interest particularly in the redevelopment of the visitor centre in the park.

1. Welcome (Sue Takwani, Chair)

At 11am, Sue opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. She gave a brief overview of the Friends' history for those new to the call:

The FoSNCP started in 2014 as a voluntary group. It was set up to help with conservation and restoration and to promote the Country Park as a local wildlife park. We have a committee; anyone who's on our email mailing list is a member; the annual voluntary membership cost is £5 per household. The website is the best place to keep informed of our activities; our Facebook page is where local photographers post beautiful photos of the Park.

Our conservation is done through workdays, held on the second and fourth Saturdays of each month.

We undertake fundraising projects – and have received grants which have helped us provide maps and lecterns in the Park.

We also hold nature walks and history tours.

Workdays are normally led by our warden; we don't currently have one due to the financial situation at Croydon Council. We are currently led voluntarily by Ian, who was the warden. He is also a member of The Conservation Volunteers (TCV). We wouldn't be able to continue without his help and supervision, especially as we no longer have the support of Meike Weiser who left her role as Community Conservation Partnership Officer at Croydon Council towards the end of 2021.

2. Report on 2021 and preview of 2022 (Chris Peskett, Treasurer & Sue)

Report on 2021 workdays

Chris Peskett gave a slideshow presentation and reported on our workdays (two per month) – describing the work we'd undertaken and illustrating the work, and some of the results a few months later. Here is a summary of the work:

March – litter picking and preparation of seedbeds. The litter picking took place along route 666, towards Elmers End. We discovered two substantial old camps and collected 15 bags of litter. We also prepared seedbeds for wildflowers – on the front triangle at the Albert Road entrance to the park and in the environmental garden by the 5-bar gate on the way to the visitor centre. We took

off the turf, raked earth; removed worst of the weeds. The environmental garden was considerably harder work and despite seeding was sadly not successful. However, on the triangle, later in the summer we had viper's bugloss, poppies, cornflowers and field bindweed, attracting many butterflies and bees.

April – fence repairs on the viewing platform and on the seasonal path and cutting back of overhanging vegetation. In lockdown, with the Park getting lots of use, quite a few fences were broken down and new paths were created. At the viewing platform near Goals and along the seasonal path we put in new chestnut paling fencing, and supports which were a gift from People for Portland Road (PPR). They'd finished using the supports from previous tree-planting and we'd stored them for future use). Lots of us got to use sledgehammers! We also cut down overhanging branches and vegetation on route 666.

May – re-siting trees. We'd noticed that trees had been planted anonymously on the La Motes area of the park, which is an archaeological site. As such, it was not an appropriate place to plant and so we took up the young trees without damaging their roots. We replanted them on the seasonal path. It transpired that Bromley Council had apparently given permission – which was outside of their remit, given it's a Croydon park.

June – more litter picking and scrub clearing. When we plant trees, we plant 'whips' which are tiny. So, we need to clear the ground around them to support them in their early growth. The trees we'd planted had grown really well. We often have to fight our way through the long grass to find the trees – and cheer! The canes and plastic surrounds which protect them from mice and voles are useful markers. We picked more litter, this time near Westgate Road. We split the group because of COVID regulations and for ease; we found lots of toiletries, suitcases, clothes, food – and used the suitcases to hold everything. This clear-up was part of the Keep Britain Tidy project with the Great British Spring Clean. We'll be doing this year's in March.

July – stream clearing. One of the streams in the Park fills the lake and so we clear silt and cut back overhanging vegetation – from the vantage point of standing in the stream. We found sticklebacks so the water must be healthy. In addition, we cleared more litter from route 666.

August – more stream-clearing and path-clearing. Again, this was to clear silt; we also went into the environment garden to clear the path for the bee inspector.

September – reedbed work and path-widening. In the reedbeds, we coppice the willow, so that the sunlight gets through to the reeds. The smell of rotting vegetation in the reedbeds is very pungent! We aim to coppice a 1/5 of the willow every year. TCV do regular coppicing which is a real help. The willow we cut down we use to make fences and this year we did this on the viewing platform with the longest path. The willow adds height which stops dogs and people jumping over into nesting areas.

October – more path-clearing and -widening. We worked on the path heading towards Harrington Road tram stop, creating sightlines along paths which is important. We used the full range of tools - slashers, loppers and shears. And on the other workday, we worked down the long path alongside Beckenham cemetery path. We also cleared litter.

November – working in the wetlands. This was a new job for us and involved many of us donning chest waders. We cut back vegetation (mostly willowherb) which rots and clogs up the water with silt. We used what we'd taken out to conceal the routes in we'd created. Others of us (for whom the waders were too large!) cleared the nearby stream. When we checked back at the wetlands in December, water had flowed back in, so it was a job well done. On the seasonal path, we cleared space to plant trees in December.

December – tree-planting, along the seasonal path. We planted tiny whips, from TCV, paid for by OVO Energy. They were hawthorn, grey willow, dogrose, hazel and willow, planted in a double row to make a thick hedge and block up gaps. This was part of TCV's project to plant 2 million trees. We'll be planting oak, alder and other species in March in the main meadow, so we may not quite have done 2 million until then!

January – clearing brambles for the primroses. This site is on the way from the compound to the mound. We took back the brambles to the fence line, which will expose the primroses and let them have plenty of light and nutrients. It was a horrible day! On our second workday, we replaced a fence on 'the beach'. During lockdown, Ian had built a fence by the side of the lake where there's easy and flat access to the water – it's the only view of the lake not from a platform. The fence had been totally ripped down. It's needed to keep dog, people and boats out of the lake –there's a coot that nests close to there every year. And it keeps the swans in – people had been feeding them and they wandered out onto the paths. We'd received a mini grant from WeLoveSE25 to buy the new fencing materials. The new fence is still there but it maybe needs a bit of TLC.

February – preparing for London Wildlife Trust (LWT) trees in the main meadow. LWT have since been working in the Park this week (23-25 February) and have planted 100 bigger, 2-metre trees, as part of their Great North Wood project. The Great North Wood used to spread from Deptford to Croydon but was decimated for boatbuilding at Deptford and to make charcoal. There are now just small patches of wood – for example Sydenham Wood and at Long Lane. This project aims to replant trees in areas that would once have been part of the Wood. Norwood and Forest Hill get their place names from the Wood. In addition, the LWT made a fence out of dead branches to help protect the area and young trees from being mown.

Review of other 2021 activities and looking ahead to 2022

Sue then gave a brief overview of forthcoming plans.

Future workdays for 2022

Tree planting hasn't stopped with LWT this week; TCV are giving us 100 more trees which we will plant on our 12 March workday – we're very proud to be able to do this. The species will be: English oak, silver birch, aspen, green beech, common alder, hornbeam, rowan and goat willow.

In terms of putting our programme together, Ian visits the park and decides what needs doing.

It's likely we'll be clearing ivy at Elmers End, so that spring flowers aren't choked.

We'll continue to clear scrub from around the trees we've planted – we can't just leave them! We need to find them and then clear a halo of 1m around each tree to let light in.

Fences may need repairing, we'll clear brambles and clear litter.

Review of other 2021 projects

One new project for 2021 was our calendar. We asked photographers who posted on Facebook if they would be happy to donate photos for our calendar. The photos are beautiful and there were a lot to choose from which made it difficult. Many thanks to John (Hufton) who designed and produced such a good quality calendar – we were very pleased with the result, which was a celebration of the Country Park. We were able to sell it at the Clocktower market on two occasions (thank you to Karen for letting us do that); we sold online; and many thanks to Trisha Pelican who enabled us selling it at an artisan fair in Shirley.

We received a mini-grant from WeLoveSE25 which enabled us to buy two new kestrel boxes and the chestnut paling, mentioned earlier. The boxes are yet to be put up; we will site one in one of the poplars, a good way from the existing box at Elmers End, where you can see the babies emerging. Once the nesting season is over, we'll replace the Elmers End one, which is falling apart.

Litter and where to put is always a problem. We asked the Council for a new bin, and they have provided us with a dual-purpose rubbish and dog waste bin, from elsewhere in Croydon, which is now sited at the Fiveways path junction, near the lake. This has helped considerably.

Repairs and graffiti-removal – many thanks to John Collis who repainted the kiosk by the pitch and putt after graffiti, with paint paid for by WeLoveSE25. The compound gate was kicked in – Ian and Doug repaired this. The Council should carry out repairs in the main Park but the wait is often long. We're very lucky to have the service of Mick, a local builder. He has built a new barrier by one of the streams, he repairs fences and other jobs. A big thank you to him.

Protecting wetland – Jonathan has organised some permanent notices for us to encourage dog-walkers to keep dogs on leads in the wetland area. We want everyone to enjoy the Park but also protect the species in the wetland.

Bird-feeding – we actively feed the birds behind the visitor centre, in the environmental garden. We pay for food, and Chris P donates it too. Chris P regularly refills, and foxes often visit.

Other plans for 2022

Path repair - Ian and Will have been putting together a big bid to Viridor, for path and viewing platform repairs. There have been a few difficulties in the process; late on, we discovered that we need to put a certain percentage of the money towards the project ourselves. We may use the proceeds from calendar sales to do this, as we would really like to carry this project through.

Wildlife walks – we hope to resume these.

We undertook a few bat walks in 2021, with Meike Weiser running them. Ian has been testing his skills and the bat detectors with walks for committee members. He will take over and run some towards the end of the season this year. Look out for these being advertised on the website.

Bird walks – Nicola Hunt kindly ran one for us this morning (26 February) which was wonderful. She is happy and we are keen to run another in May.

We are always looking for other experts. We would particularly like to run a butterfly walk. If you know of anyone, please let us know.

3. Treasurer's report (Chris P)

Chris reported that our finances are not doing badly, particularly producing the calendar for the first time.

Income was £4166, comprising £3450 from calendar-sales; £341 in cash donations and membership; the £336 mini-grant from WeLoveSE25; and £39 from our cloth tote-bag sales.

Expenditure was £3824. The largest cost was for purchasing calendars (£1989); fencing and benches were £719; £575 on bird food which seems quite a lot but it's worth doing. Crows have managed to open the feeder, but we've seen dunnocks, robins and woodpeckers feeding. Lots of bird food has been donated by committee members (i.e. Chris P – ed). Other expenditure has been on our insurance, tools and equipment, wildflower seeds, kestrel boxes and website fees.

Chris invited people to ask questions later, after the break.

PayPal – we have recently added this payment facility to our website, for membership or any other donations. Donors will be able to pay using their own PayPal account, or a credit or debit card.

We then had a 5-minute break.

4. Question time (Sue)

We resumed with a question-time, picking up some of the questions asked in 'chat'.

A question was asked about monitoring bats: Ian replied that he hoped to do a transect in the Country Park and knows someone who can help.

Emma Guthrie reported that the Friends of SN Lakes also have detectors. She said that the Friends of SN is smaller at the moment but that she'd found this morning really inspirational.

friendsofsouthnorwoodlakes@gmail.com. The Friends of SN Lakes started with a large grant.

Emma also asked where we had our bank account. Chris P replied that we'd changed account and moved to Metro Bank during the last year (who don't charge fees).

We're reiterated how grateful we are for Ian's expertise - we wouldn't be able to operate without him.

Emma shared that Friends of SN Lakes had held open days – with plant sales, and bric-a-brac; they'd sold sausages and burgers/food in partnership other park users. They'd borrowed a card reader to make payments/donations easier. They now have their own, which was only £15. They raised quite a lot of money. Emma provided the link for the card-reader: <https://squareup.com/>

Paulette added that she uses card readers in her union role: it's possible to set specific amounts and it definitely increased contributions.

Howard asked several questions and made several observations: we established that the kestrels have already taken up occupancy in the Elmers End box; he reported that he'd be happy to provide a squirrel-proof bird-feeder for the garden. He also asked whether it would be possible to install another notice at the other entrance to the wetland – like we have at the Elmers End entrance to the path. He asked if this could help keep dogs on leads. He also asked about whether a midweek workday could be possible.

On the midweek workdays, a topic raised last year, Sue reiterated that this is not viable at the moment given most of the committee and volunteers still work, and we have no warden.

However, Ian could put Howard in touch with TCV Croydon, who meet every Wednesday and Thursday. They volunteer at sites all over Croydon, not just SNCP. Currently, they volunteer in SNCP every month, less in the growing season. Ian reported that workdays are advertised on their website, four months in advance and you can just turn up. Ian invited Howard to email the friends Gmail account and he'll send on details; or to look directly at TCV's website.

The existing wetlands noticeboard was put in by TCV Ponds project. We'd need a pot of money to be able to put a substantial sign at the other end of the path – in the region of £2K. We are experimenting with temporary signs to keep dogs on leads.

We would be very grateful for a birdfeeder. Our current ones are meant to be for a certain sized bird. Parakeets may actually be worst culprits. Howard was invited to email Ian at friends account, and we will work out how to take this forward. Thank you.

Duncan asked for an update on the reopening of the visitor centre. Lucy, on the call, from the Friends of Ryelands, has been involved in some of the recent consultations with the council. She reported that feedback from the community has been given to the Council and they have published the summary of it. There is no timetable for works yet.

We were certainly hoping not to be on Zoom for our AGM this year, which normally happens in the visitor centre.

5. Election of officers, committee (Sue)

Sue summarised the current make-up of the committee: there are nine people serving, of whom five are officers (the executive committee).

The officers are: Chair, Sue Takwani; Vice-Chair, Chris Claridge; Treasurer, Chris Peskett; Secretary, Ian Glover and Minutes Secretary, Leonie Mason.

Other committee members: Sundeep Takwani, Jonathan Tolhurst, Will Hoyles and Norman Murray.

Paul Scott and John Hufton stepped down during 2021.

No new nominations had been received and all existing members have agreed to stand again.

The new committee therefore comprises (proposers and seconders noted):

Officers:

Sue Takwani (chair) – Chris Peskett; Chris Claridge. Chris thanked Sue for doing such a good job.

Chris Claridge (vice-chair) – Sue Takwani; Chris Peskett

Chris P (treasurer) – Leonie Mason; Ian Glover

Ian (secretary) – Sundeep Takwani ; Will Hoyles

Leonie (minutes secretary) – Sue Takwani; Ian Glover

Other members:

Sundeep Takwani, Jonathan Tolhurst, Will Hoyles and Norman Murray were happy to remain on the committee.

Sue invited anyone who'd like to join the committee to volunteer. She outlined that we meet on Zoom, 4 times a year; our next meeting in April.

Lucy Hopkins volunteered to join the committee.

Action: Leonie will email Lucy with dates for future committee meetings, and with further details.

Sue thanked the committee for continuing and everyone for attending the meeting today.

6. AOB

John Collis proposed a vote of thanks.

Others wanting to join workdays were invited to let us know via the Friends Gmail address.

The meeting finished at about 12:25pm.