

**Friends of South Norwood Country Park,
Held at Stanley Hall, Stanley Arts, 12 South Norwood Hill, SE25 6AB.**

11am, 26/2/23

We opened the doors at 10:30am; tea, coffee and cake were served, and people paid membership fees and made donations before and after the official meeting.

There were 25 present, including Sue Takwani, Chris Peskett, Chris Claridge, Ian Glover, Sundeep Takwani and Leonie Mason from the committee.

We received apologies from Will Hoyles and Norman Murray.

1. Welcome (Sue Takwani, Chair)

Sue welcomed those present, with a brief overview of the Friends' history and what we do.

The Friends were formed in 2014, and work for the conservation of the Park, and to promote it. We are run by a committee; anyone can become a member by signing up to receive our emails.

We have a website and a Facebook page.

South Norwood Country Park is a designated local nature reserve; conservation is carried out through workdays.

Through fundraising and grants, we've installed map noticeboards and lecterns in the Park; we run wildlife walks, history walks and talks.

The London Borough of Croydon owns the site; their grounds maintenance team look after the Park on a basic level – emptying bins, cutting and mowing the grass areas. Volunteers litter-pick and undertake conservation.

The Friends meet twice monthly on Saturdays, led by Ian Glover, who gives expertise. We couldn't run without him.

The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) carry out their own workdays over 2 days every few weeks or months. We collaborate with them so that we can finish each other's work. They've joined some of our workdays – it's been very helpful to have their help and transport.

2. Report on 2022 and preview of 2023 (Chris Peskett, Treasurer, and Sue)

Chris then presented the report for 2022, our eighth year.

She also stressed that our workdays are about conservation – we aren't a normal London park with tulips! We are a nature reserve, and the Friends exist to preserve the flora and fauna, and the benefits they bring.

Chris described the work done at our **workdays** through the year:

March: trees, fences, seed beds and watering.

These are common tasks throughout the year.

We had planted 100 free, very small trees, otherwise known as 'whips' from the TCV I Dig Trees project, in the meadow towards cemetery. We've been planting in this area since 2013/14, and there are bigger trees there too. It's part of the Great North Wood project – we are trying to increase the woodland area. The trees we plant are all native: English oak, silver birch, aspen, green beech, common alder, hornbeam, rowan, and goat willow.

The majority survive.

Network Rail donated nine large trees – small-leaved Limes and hornbeams - planted by the London Wildlife Trust. We were very grateful for them, and knew they would need a lot of watering. We borrowed a waterhog from the People for Portland Road. It holds 50L of water and enabled us to transport water more easily from the kiosk, as it rolls and is easily pulled. On the workday, we transported 150L of water and it looks like they've survived.

We also worked on the triangle at the front entrance of the Park, cutting back and preparing the seedbed for the wildflower meadow.

April: seeds beds, fences, brambles, watering, culvert and paths.

We continued work on the seedbeds.

We have an apiary, with two hives, currently. We cut back the hedge to maintain access.

We repaired fences around the environment garden to keep out dogs and humans – so far we have succeeded with the dogs.

Chris told us more about the environment garden. In it, we still fill the bird feeders every day, with peanuts and suet, for nuthatches, woodpeckers, dunnocks. It's well worth it.

We have a lot of pigeons, because of a lady feeding them with bread, putting it on the visitor centre roof; clever crows were stealing whole fat balls, so we changed the feeder.

We cut back overhanging brambles on the seasonal path, so walkers are not impeded.

We sometimes have to deal with antisocial behaviour – our dead hedge at Elmers End had been destroyed to create a bridge to pitch tents and fish, in an area where lots of birds are nesting. We rebuilt it.

May: was the month of being locked out, and scrub-clearance.

People often try and break in the compound. Someone had tried to get into our container and destroyed the lock, meaning we couldn't access our tools.

On our second workday, we were caring for whips. We plant whips, we put plastic tubes around each one, to stop voles from gnawing them. They also help us to find them as the greenery grows up around them. We then clear a one-metre circle around each one, helping them to survive.

June: dead hedges, scrub-clearing, shed-clearing, streams and watering.

The dead hedge created by volunteers on the beach had sunk – some of this is natural; some is caused by people stepping over. We installed chestnut paling, to keep humans off the beach and dogs out of the water.

We cleared scrub, which was up to our waists, as we searched for the little trees.

The London Wildlife Trust had planted poplars near the lake, and we cleared around them.

We cleared out the apiary shed. This had been occupied by a Polish rough sleeper, who'd in the end needed help, and left the Park. The shed was swept and sanitised and reclaimed for the beekeepers. It had been safe and tidy since, but the lock on the door has been broken again; it is now repaired.

We watered.

We cleared the streams of overhanging foliage, to prevent build-up of silt. We cut back, and dig out the channels, so that water can flow.

We've recently applied to Thames Water for chestwaders so that we can get in and do work when there is more water in the channels. We hope that bid will be successful.

July: stream-clearing, beach-barrier, and watering.

Near Elmers End, the chestnut paling at beach hadn't survived, so we took it down. Built up the dead hedge. We coppiced willow (coppicing is good for the reed beds, so that the light can get in); others dragged the branches; others built up the hedge.

TCV provide the hazel stakes for the dead hedge from Kingswood, for free.

Chris told us more about dead hedges – stressing that they are good for biodiversity, attracting insects, bugs, birds, little rodents. They are totally natural.

The water hog was in huge use. We bought 2 more, so that we can complete more runs to the kiosk. We put 400L on the trees.

August: watering, culvert-clearing, dead hedge and tool maintenance.

It was so hot and dry and so for the first workday, we just watered – the Network Rail trees, and the LWT trees which had mulch mats to try and help conserve water.

We watered in shifts, taking turns to take a waterhog, empty it, and then sit in the shade whilst someone else took over.

On the second workday, we cleared the culvert near Goals. This is the culvert that feeds the lake. It had really dried out last summer and so we wanted to maximise the water-flow.

Others took shelter in compound, sharpened tools and made stakes for hedging.

September: further culvert clearing, dead hedges, ivy-clearing.

Heavy rain beforehand meant there was no need to water – hooray!

However, the rain exposed the fact that the culvert wasn't running clear, even after the work in August. In borrowed waders, we had to get in the pool and crawl under the bridge to clear it using a spade. TCV (which is led by Jane H) helped us.

We tried to make the dead hedge more secure.

We cleared ivy, ready for the wild flowers (hopefully bluebells) to flower in the spring.

October: fence repairs, and wildflower beds, near tram tracks.

Another group had wanted to turn the environment garden into an allotment. They had begun digging and brought in tyres for planting. A nature reserve is not the right place for this, although allotments are often good for nature.

When the Visitor Centre is rebuilt, there will be schools coming into the environmental garden. And so we asked the Council to put a chain on the gate to deter access, and we mended the fence with chestnut paling, and the gate.

We cleared more scrub on the triangle; the seeds sadly hadn't germinated and grown in the summer, as it had been too hot and dry.

In October, we also started to sell our calendars. On that first day, we sold 56 – many to those on the Park Run and perhaps because it was a lovely day.

November: bramble-clearing and planting preparation.

In the previous year we'd cleared brambles from the SE slope of the mound, near to the tram-tracks.

We then had the most wonderful display of cowslips, and so we cleared the area again this year.

We prepared ground for more whip-planting on the seasonal path. There had been a lot of breaking through with walkers during COVID. The previous planting of hawthorns there had done well, as it's shaded.

December: hedge-planting.

We planted, and put plastic sleeves around 150 trees, from TCV and I Dig Trees (funded by OVO energy). Over the course of this project, 3 million trees have been planted, so we've done our bit.

We got most of the 150 done (our workday is only about one and a half hours by the time we've loaded barrows and go the site where we're working); TCV finished in the snow.

January: bramble-clearing, coppicing, and hedge-building.

We cleared the copse near the car park of brambles; we'd done this the previous year and did again – there are beautiful and large numbers of primroses that come up.

We did more coppicing, dragging, and sawing up a dead tree, as preparation for two tasks: the first was weaving a fence between short stakes on the seasonal path, to stop dogs heading through to the meadow; the second was creating a dead-hedge to protect the newly planted wood, especially from mowing (one year, the Council managed to mow many of our newly planted whips!). They are also great for biodiversity. That day we saw a vole who'd made his home there in an earlier section.

February: continued making dead hedge near our wood, and made repairs/strengthened the hedge on the beach.

We made the beach dead hedge/fence stouter and stronger, with the help of TCV's drill.

We put notices up to explain why the barrier is there. We have explained what the dead hedge is (a natural habitat) and that the area is set aside for wildlife, especially nesting birds (and not for picnics or sunbathing!); there are also signs nearby prohibiting fishing – a coot often nests there and so we don't want people or dogs to disturb.

We also transplanted two oak trees (from the Woodside Health Centre and near the Leisure Centre) and planted them in our wood.

Thank you to Tim for digging them up; and to the jays or squirrels who'd planted them!

Sue then thanked Chris for her report on our workdays. She then continued to review our **other activities**.

The 2023 calendar

Sue thanked the local photographers who had donated their wonderful photographs for our calendar – and said that they were even more beautiful than last year's. She explained:

The calendar was a celebration of everything that's wonderful about the Park – it's why we produce it and it helps us to raise funds.

We are going to use money to make temporary repairs to viewing platforms around lake. We hope they will be replaced completely in due course, to be confirmed by Croydon Council.

Thanks to our local carpenter – who has already carried out a lot of repairs. He will make the temporary repairs.

Sue also expressed our thanks to Karen, who allowed us to sell the calendar at the Clocktower Market. We were also able to sell them at the 'flu clinic in the Country Park Practice and at an artisan craft market (at the Addiscombe, Woodside & Shirley Allotments) through one of the Park's beekeepers.

Kestrel boxes

Sue reported that we had been able to purchase two new boxes, with a We Love SE25 mini-grant. We needed to replace our existing box, and wanted to put on up in the poplar tree at the base of the mound. The purchase was easy; the fixing was more difficult! A tree surgeon was needed for this task, and we had to work within the kestrel's nesting schedule.

Michael Howden from Howden's tree care very kindly installed the boxes free of charge on a very wet and windy day. Thank you!

Walks and talks

Sue reported that we were finally able to resume these in 2022. She continued:

Thanks to Ian for 3 bat walks, in July, August and September. They were attended by many species of bats!

Thanks to John Hickman for a Beckenham cemetery walk and talk – he leads these to raise funds for the Friends. They are always a delight with lots of anecdotes and interesting facts and stories.

Nicola Hunt also led a couple of bird walks, including one this morning (of the AGM). This was very good, and well attended by lots of birds!

Hedge-laying demonstration

TCV were working in the Park the weekend before the AGM, laying a hedge at the end of the seasonal path. The warden from Ashted Common gave training, with a talk and demonstration. It is different from a dead hedge, as the wood is still living, and rejuvenates. Lots of birds had been there too. There is a sign on the hedge explaining about it.

We plan to organise more walks in 2023 and Sue encouraged us to look on our website and Facebook page for more details.

London Tree and Woodland Awards

These were held in May, and Sue and Ian attended. We had been nominated in the Community Woodland Award, and we were highly commended. Sue said that she's very proud of what we've done (our tree-planting), and that someone there cheered for us!

3. Treasurer's report (Chris P)

Chris P then summarised our final accounts for 2022:

Donations: £1,519 – with a special thank you to John and Eva.

Main income came from the calendars: £3,948

And some income from the sale of our tote bags.

Total income: £5,550

Total payments: £2,910

Within this, the cost of producing the calendars was £1,105, meaning that overall, we made a profit of more than £2,000 from calendar sales.

Our public liability insurance was £112.

We also purchased tools and equipment.

We spent £565 on bird food. The birds are slightly fighting us – parakeets are demolishing the feeders; great tits have learned to take whole peanuts as a result; we need to wire up the holes!

£8 was spent on membership for the Association of Croydon Conservation Societies.

£187 on website fees.

Net: £2,640

In addition, we **carried over £6,073 from 2021**. We will spend some of this on temporary repairs to the platforms.

Since year-end, we have also been awarded money for new benches by We Love SE25; we have also applied to Thames Water's Community Fund for chest waders, funding to help repair paths and to purchase tools. We are waiting to hear.

Chris closed her presentation with a photograph of a pheasant who, along with the dunnocks, robins, great tits and the fox are regular visitors to the environmental garden and the bird feeders.

4. Election of officers and confirmation of committee (Sue)

The following **officers** were elected:

Chair: Sue Takwani – proposer, Chris Peskett; seconder, Ian Glover.

Vice Chair: Chris Claridge – proposer, Sue Takwani; seconder, Sundeep Takwani.

Treasurer: Chris Peskett – proposer, Leonie Mason; seconder, John Hughes.

Secretary: Ian Glover – proposer, Sue Takwani; seconder, Paulette Romain.

Minutes Secretary: Leonie Mason - proposer; Sundeep Takwani, seconder, Howard Dingley.

Committee: Sundeep Takwani, Jonathan Tolhurst and Will Hoyles have all expressed a willingness to continue.

Sue invited others who would like to join, to volunteer - Howard Dingley did so.

Committee meetings are currently still being held over Zoom.

5. AOB

Sue concluded the formal part of the meeting by thanking everyone for their support, whether through the physical workdays, coming to the AGM, making donations or attending the walks and talks.

There then followed a question time, with answers from various members of the committee and key volunteers in the Park.

Questions

Heather: is there any truth in **Thames Water having released sewage** into the stream? There is a pumping station adjacent to Harrington Road and the stepping-stones.

Legally Thames Water can release water from the pumping station into the stream when there is a lot of rain. They say it's happened twice in the year.

Sarah Jones MP has been involved, as there does appear to have been sewage in the stream.

There is apparently a leak before the pumping station, caused by a broken sewer or manhole cover – so sewage in the stream could be caused by damaged equipment rather than release. Thames Water were due to report back to Sarah Jones; we haven't yet heard any more.

Thames Water are keen to help in the Park with a 'clean-up day'.

Howard commented that with wet wipes having been found, if they are from the damaged sewer, it can't have just been a crack.

John Hughes commented that there is also run-off from the cemetery into the culvert.

Duncan: are there any plans for **litter-picking outside of workdays**?

Ian explained that Thames Water are keen to hold a corporate work day, and we've offered litter-picking in that area. Sue commented that while there are wild flowers coming up, we want to leave the area undisturbed.

Ian explained that there is a dedicated litter-picking group (separate from the Friends). Route 666 is often bad.

Lots of individuals pick litter, and we sometimes do it as part of our work days.

We can build it into our workday schedule but our current difficulty is getting litter back to the compound. With no warden, we have no van/pick-up truck to transport bags/larger items.

We can organise collection of our assembled litter bags with the Council.

On our workdays, there are 10-15 of us and we do get a lot done, but there's a limit to how much time we can give to this.

Ken: has there been any evidence of **bird deaths due to bird 'flu'**?

John Hughes (who watches and records birds through the year voluntarily) said that hadn't been signs in the Park.

John then went on to outline the general pattern of **bird species decline**. He commented on the awful decline in all species in last 3 or 4 years due to habitat loss, global and national situations. Lots of species are now on red lists.

He is keen that with some historic environmental fine money from Thames Water, we do as much as we can for the habitat.

Snipe are finding it hard, because meadow growth is too long, after frost. With no warden, basic maintenance jobs in the Park – like mowing, normally done in consultation with the warden – are not being done.

Whitethroats, similarly, need meadows to be cut.

John reported that he and Ian had held meetings with the Councillor for the Environment (Councillor Scott Roche). The Councillor underlined that there are no resources and maintenance staff numbers have been cut again.

John reported that in January there were 2-3 Council workers on site in the Park, for the first time in months, but they didn't seem to know what to do. Specialist help is needed.

JH has another meeting next week, and does feel more hopeful than he has in a while.

He described that every year we lose another species from the Park. Reed buntings have now gone – they used to breed; now they don't even visit.

We have the lesser whitethroat – but no breeding.

He said it is a battle – and suggested that we can fight on locally. He has contacted the two local MPs – Sarah Jones and Ellie Reeves. He's trying to get heavy-weight support, and would like everyone to pitch in.

He said that without the Friends and TCV, the Park would be a wasteland.

Howard asked how many of the Friends live on the **Bromley side of the Park**. We answered that there is a good split amongst workday people, with more from the South Norwood side.

Howard commented that the Elmers End boundary by the bus stop and the entrance is terrible for litter and **flytipping**.

We explained that we can report fly tips within the park – will go through to the Parks Department. Croydon Council is obliged to pick up fly tips within park. The pavement at Elmers End is within Bromley. They have laid off staff as well.

Lynn who works for RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) then asked if we have any **data on bird species decline and litter**, as it is useful for lobbying.

On bird species decline, John Hughes produces annual reports, and this information is on our website.

There are also logs with the RSPB and BTO (British Trust for Ornithology).

Lynn said that she might be able to help us with communications using this data.

Action: Sue and Lynn to be in touch.

On wider data, Jonathan has created a snagging list of repairs and issues that need dealing with, and does contact the Council.

Tracy Bellamy at the Council co-ordinates the street champions, who collect litter, and she does record data.

We commented that the wind, foxes and magpies contribute to spreading litter from the bins in the Park. Doug P does empty the bins in between Croydon Council visits to minimise; John C also clears around Arena.

Between them, Chris P, Doug P and John C collected 1840 bags of litter, reported to Tracy.

In summary, Friends groups and volunteers are doing the majority of the work in and around the Park.

Marion: is there was any **education** happening on these issues?

It's a good idea but it does come down to manpower and a venue. When the visitor centre is open again, it will have an educational role, as before. But we don't have capacity or facilities now.

With this, our time limit was reached and the meeting concluded.